

Pentecost 24A. November 19, 2017. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Psalm 136:1-9; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-29.

‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

Imagine: you live in first century Jerusalem. Your city has somehow pulled itself together after terrible destruction, perhaps like cities in Iraq or Syria today. You are somehow making a living. You gather with friends around a table in the largest house you can find and you are packed a little too tight for comfort. It’s getting darker earlier, colder too. You hold your youngest children and the older ones fool around on the fringes of the group.

Someone is telling a story about ten bridesmaids and how five of them got into the wedding and five didn’t. Then someone told the story about how a rich man gave

amazingly large amounts of money to his employees / slaves / accountants and left for a long business trip. Some of the men invested wisely and pulled in a 100% increase. One didn't. And that one was punished.

Then, as now, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

The stories are a bit frightening. What if the bridegroom didn't invite YOU into the wedding because you slipped up and didn't bring enough oil for your lamp? Or what if the bridegroom was like the manager who gave out money for investment and your investment didn't do well? You didn't lose anything, but didn't gain anything either. Would you be considered "worthless"?

And is God is supposed to be like the bridegroom who arrives late and takes only some people? Or like the businessman with all the money who rewards and punishes based on achievement? Chilling thoughts.

It WAS a chilling time. People were being excluded from their religious community for telling these stories, for talking about Jesus as though he were the Messiah, for hanging on the hope that he would return one of these Sundays.

There IS some good news this morning however. First, we remember a lot of other, much happier stories. Stories of forgiveness, stories of blessing of children, stories of healing of the sick and the blind. AND: Jesus DOES come again. At Communion we sing "Amen, come Lord Jesus" and "Christ will come, come again." And – we aren't sure exactly how or when or why Jesus would come again among us. But, as I pondered this concept, last week and this, I became even more convinced that the best and perhaps only ways we find Jesus among us is when we see Christ in one another [more about this next week] and when we eat crumbs of bread and drink sips of wine as he called us to do in remembrance and in joyful thanksgiving.

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Luther said that if a sermon did not point to Christ, then it was not faithful. We COULD take these two stories and make Jesus into a new Moses, demanding that we be prepared, give more, work harder, do more for others, be more worthy of the Master's love by using our talents and money wisely. Nothing against using talents and money wisely, but that's not enough for a faithful sermon.

You already DO these things. Probably the people huddled together in first century Jerusalem did too. Were probably tired like some of us are on Sunday morning or evening when they gathered.

How might the Jesus we know as representative of God’s faithfulness and grace have intended this story to be understood?

Let’s face it: the wedding host last week and the businessman this week were not how we envision a loving, welcoming God. The two smarter investors hustle to please the exacting master. The third one is terrified; he saw his boss as harsh and expecting more than he should. After all, investments with such great interest in those days were considered exploitative. Burying money was prudent. Rich people were suspected of dishonesty and evil-doing.

At the time these stories were told, Jesus was getting ready to face immense pain and hardship. In just a couple days he would hang on the cross. Perhaps he, and the editors of Matthew’s Gospel, were trying to prepare their listeners for the hardships of the so-called “real” world they inhabited.

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But maybe the story is not so much about God or Jesus as it is about the investors.

Two took their master’s will to heart; one was afraid.

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Think back to your childhood. Remember the day mom went to the store and Tom threw the ball in the living room and knocked mom’s favorite vase off the shelf. “You’re gonna be in so much t-r-o-u-b-l-e,” taunted Tom’s brothers, who had also been playing ball. Tom picked up the pieces and hid them in a bag in the garage. When Mom’s car pulled into the driveway, Tom trembled. He expects his mother to be angry, “reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed. I was afraid . . . and hid . . . your broken vase in the garage.”

Tom believes that mom loves her vase more than she loves him. The kids believe they will be praised when they do something good, and yelled at or punished when they do something wrong or are not as good as others. Tom best run and hide.

But sooner or later Mom will notice that the vase is gone. Now she is not just angry and sad about the broken vase, but about the broken trust. Tom did not take her warning about ball-playing for real and Tom does not take her love for real.

Perhaps we want only the God who is generous, welcoming and loving. But Jesus’ story could serve as a reminder that the same God who is loving has also given us warnings: Commandments that if we follow will offer us a better society and healthier lives. No ball-playing in the house. No stealing, warmongering, killing,

unfaithfulness to spouse or partner, telling of lies, dishonoring parents. All “investments” if you will, to give us a safer, happier, God-pleasing life. And the first commandment: to love God with all our heart, soul and mind.

We can make many things more important than our love of God and one another. Correct theology, proper forms of worship, right thinking, prudent financial management, moral behavior, a particular way of interpreting Scripture. And we take pride in “doing things right.” We take pride in how our kids turn out, in how neat our homes are, how successful our business is, how well we sing, paint, build; how we look, how we act, and whatever it takes to make us respectable to others and acceptable to ourselves. We forget that pride separates us from God. We forget WHO makes these good things possible. We forget Jesus’ promise that we are loved REGARDLESS.

When Tom’s mom notices the broken vase, or the lack of oil for the wedding feast, or the wasted talent, or the self-serving pride, she will be sad, angry, but mostly disappointed that Tom did not heed her warning nor trust her love. But she loves Tom more than she loves the vase and she will seek to rebuild the broken relationship.

That’s why the people huddled in the small room told LOTS of stories. They remembered the night in which Jesus was betrayed. They shuddered at the story of the cross. They planned a festival to remember his birth in Bethlehem and his mother Mary and stepfather Joseph. That time would come soon and help lighten the growing darkness. Most of all they told the stories of how some of their grandparents encountered Jesus on Easter Day and the week after and how Peter had preached and baptized.

They took both the warnings and the life-giving love to heart.

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This week we will celebrate what Canadians call “American Thanksgiving.” We look at our lives. So many blessings! We are permitted to use our money, our health, our talents as we see fit. God took a chance on us and went for broke. Like the goods entrusted to the slaves in today’s story, our lives, health and wealth have been entrusted to us.

If prudent, we take to heart both warning and promise. As we feast, work and relax this coming Thursday, we count ourselves among those most blessed and we pray that we might be a blessing to others.

We get to take our talents of forgiveness and invest that forgiveness in our neighbors rather than giving people what they deserve. The kingdom of heaven is to live, trusting that Jesus says, “Enter into the joy of your master.” Jesus says it, not because of what we have done, but because he wants to say it to us. That’s who he is!

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What will happen when we believe this!?

Amen.