

November 15th 2020 Worship

Reading; Matthew 25:14-30 (New International Version)

The Parable of the Bags of Gold

¹⁴ “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, ^[a] each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹ “After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.’

²¹ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²² “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

²³ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²⁴ “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was

afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.'

²⁶ "His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸ "'So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Sermon

Risky Business

We are nearing the end of the year both literally and scripturally. It's hard to believe that the beginning of Advent is only two weeks away. But as we approach that time we are also approaching the end of Jesus' story in Matthew. And we come to a parable that I'm sure is quite familiar to many. I know I've heard a number of stewardship sermons based on this text.

The story begins with a wealthy man who is going on a journey, so he summons his slaves and entrusts property to them. It's hard for me to imagine the magnitude of the wealth spoken of here – maybe Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates. This rich master distributes 8 "talents" – each worth

as much as an ordinary laborer could earn in fifteen years. Whether a man received 5 talents, 2 or 1 they were entrusted with a huge sum. Off goes the wealthy man and his slaves know not when he will return.

I want to pause for a moment to think about slavery. We don't know exactly what their conditions were, but we believe this was not like the chattel slavery that existed in the early days of our country. More likely this was due to poverty or debt, but those details are not in our text. We just hear about when this wealthy guy returns and he wants to know how his investments have done. People who engage in investing talk about *risk*. I don't know what it might have been like then, but investors today say it takes significant time to double your investment – so time plus some amount of risk must have benefited the two slaves who were able to double their holdings. (I wonder what would have happened if they had risked the talents they had, but their investments hadn't panned out? What might have happened then?) But the third guy, the one who buries his talent to keep it safe – well we need to look at him a bit more. When he says he took the action he did because he knew his master was harsh, reaping where he did not sow – he essentially kept the money safe. Interestingly, that is the action recommended by some sacred tracts, but that's not the way the wealthy man sees it. So the first two guys, though with different results are praised – 'well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your

master.’ But the one who buried what he had, seeking to keep it safe, is cast into the outer darkness.

I am really struggling with this story; is this truly a story that Jesus – the Jesus who stood on the side of the poor would tell, or is there something more to know here? It’s important to remember where this parable comes in Matthew’s narrative. This is very near the end of Matthew’s Gospel and Jesus is only a short time away from his encounter with Pilate and his eventual journey to the cross. And he tells his disciples three parables about the kingdom of heaven. The first is a reminder that we can’t know the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come; the second we heard last week about the ten maids waiting for the arrival of the bridegroom but only five come prepared for the lengthy wait. Remember too, that Matthew’s real concern about readiness is that it isn’t passive. Rather it requires that people be engaged in the kind of care God asks of us – something made more clear in a few verses beyond this passage – feeding the hungry, welcoming strangers, clothing and visiting those in need and in prison – attending to the needs of others. In this time of COVID I was thinking about what our engagement can be when we can’t be together in person. We can let those we love know we’re thinking of them with calls or cards. We also wear our masks and do those basic things we know to stay safe and healthy.

Waiting is hard if that is what you are focused on. Was it the waiting that was problematic for the man with one talent? Several things come to mind when I think of him. When the wealthy man distributed the talents in the first place, he indicated he was doing it according to the ability he saw in each. Seems as if he was a pretty good judge as those first two slaves did very well with their investments. But this third man – well, he is either cautious or afraid of this master who is ‘harsh’. Or perhaps he just doesn’t want to work that hard to gain something for a master who seems to take advantage of people.

How do we view our faith? Is it a kind of high-risk adventure like the two who invested their talents or does it serve as a kind of comfort Zone – something that serves to keep us safe now and in the hereafter? What does our faith ask of us? This story wasn’t just for those disciples who were with Jesus then; it is an invitation for us today to be a fully invested in those things our faith asks of us.

As I was thinking about this challenge it brought to mind my past week. This was the time of my continuing education. Normally most of us would travel to some place where we could be together and be exposed to some new ideas as well as connect with friends and new people through the network. But, for reasons we all know, that wasn’t a good idea this year. So, I’m celebrating some folks who worked hard to bring many of us together on Zoom from all across this country and

Canada as well as several other places around the globe. It meant some folks had to stretch into areas they had never gone before to bring us together for learning and fellowship. Though I would have loved to see old friends face to face, the time we had together was rich with sharing and learning from each other, so I give thanks to those who worked so hard to make this event happen.

This time of COVID is challenging us. I think we'll all admit it is Hard – but it's also calling on our gifts and talents of creativity and perseverance to continue to be part of the adventure of faithfully following Jesus Christ and responding to God's generosity.

I'd like to close with the words of a favorite hymn – *Take My Gifts* by Shirley Erena Murray who is from New Zealand:

Take my gifts and let me love you, God who first of all loved me,
Gave me light and food and shelter, gave me life and set me free,
Now because your love has touched me, I have love to give away,
Now the bread of love is rising, loaves of love to multiply!

Take the fruit that I have gathered from the tree your Spirit sowed,
Harvest of your own compassion, juice that makes the wine of
God,

Spiced with humor, laced with laughter – flavor of the Jesus life,
Tang of risk and new adventure, taste and zest beyond belief.

Take whatever I can offer – gifts that I have yet to find,
Skills that I am slow to sharpen, talents of the hand and mind,
Things made beautiful for others in the place where I must be:
Take my gifts and let me love you, God who first of all loved me.