

November 16, 2014 “What Did You Do with Your Life?” Matthew 25:14-30 I Thessalonians 5:1-11

The apostle Paul spoke to the early Christians about the end time, when the Lord would return. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus told of unprepared bridesmaids as a warning to those who wait. It seems as though we have started Advent a couple of weeks early! Even so, let’s see what the message for our living is today.

Imagine we are at a Parent Support and Grief Group. There’s a large group of parents, all ages, some nineteen, some forty, some seventy-five.... Sharing time has brought forth all sorts of difficult stories: the child born only to die at the age of four months. The teenager who was able to dance and sing so well, until an accident rendered her totally brain-damaged. The son whose IQ was over 150, but who was arrested last week on drug charges...The daughter who gave up a college scholarship to live in an abusive relationship.... The thirty-year old who abandoned her three kids and vanished.... The fifty-two year-old sinking in alcoholic destruction.

The list of heartbreaks goes on and on, as one parent after another tells of broken dreams and diminished hopes. There had been such potential! In each case, there had been hopes and dreams, and usually abilities, which had been shattered.... The final speaker in this imaginary meeting does not appear in Body form, but everyone present is able to hear the Voice clearly as it sounds. This speaker cries: “I have given each of my many children precious gifts, some more obvious than others. In every life, I have invested myself, hoping for response, yearning for the child to love me and to love others, and to use what I have given for the good of others. But alas, most of the time my kids don’t even notice what I have given them, and if they do, they don’t realize that it is I who have given it to them.... . My children often do not use what they have been given, if they notice their gifts, because they are afraid that they are mediocre...not good enough in the face of the performances of others. My children are afraid to trust that I have made each one precious.... They hold back and do not live as I have created them to live.” You guessed it: the Voice is the heart of God, our God.

Jesus told the parable we call the “Parable of the Talents” to shake folks up a bit. Preacher Bill Bouknight put it this way: “Anybody who would follow Jesus must be a risk-taker. Allow me to paraphrase a statement of Jesus: ‘If your main concern is to preserve your life and your possessions, you won't fit into my company. But if you are willing to risk (and perhaps lose) your life or possessions in my service, then you'll fit in just fine.’ Christians are risk-takers.” (Adapted from Collected Sermons, Dr. Bill Bouknight, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2002) }

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus told of a Master who had left his wealth in the hands of his slaves or servants. We’re not told what the Master said to them, only that he entrusted various amounts to each one. A “talent” in those days was a lot of money - about FIVE years’ worth of wages. One of the servants buried the money in the ground to keep it safe, which, according to the Jewish law of the 1st Century AD, was the safest acceptable thing to do with money (quoting E. Schweizer in *The Good News According to Matthew*, John Knox Press, 1975); the other two invested the money.

The Master was gone for a long time. When he finally returned, he went to each one to settle accounts with them. The Master was pleased with the two who had invested the money, but he was quite upset with the one who had buried the money in the ground. He called him wicked and lazy, and took the money from him to give to one of the others to manage.

The pastor of a large church had a sign hanging above his desk which asked, "Well, what did you do with your life?" He explained to all who asked about it that in a dream one night he had pictured himself before the judgment seat of God, where God looked at him and rather matter-of-factly asked, "Well, what did you do with your life?" From that dream, he said, he awoke with a renewed sense of urgency about his life. He realized the answer was, Not so much. So he recommitted himself to making every decision in light of God's question.

Professor Richard Sturm told of hearing a sermon illustration which the preacher called "The Critical Inch." He started by mentioning the time line, on which human historical existence is but a minute portion. Then he held up another line, this one being that of an individual life. The last segment of this line was one in which the person realized that death was imminent, and finally set as much as possible in order: treasured keepsakes were assigned to family and friends; old grievances were pardoned; affirmations of love were finally spoken; and death finally faced aware and unafraid. The point of the illustration was that our lives would be tremendously different if our preparedness to meet our end characterized not only our last month or two, but our last few years, or even our last few decades. *If we live this day knowing that we will one day be accountable for what we did with it, we will be more inclined to wonder about the kind of offering to God we are living. This is the challenge of God's Word.*

We are people with talents, but in ways that go beyond whether we can sing or dance or balance books or perform brain surgery. We are talented because God has entrusted us with life itself AND with a message - through Jesus - as to what is important to God. "Love God; love others.... For God so loved the world, that He gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have everlasting life." We have been given something more valuable than anything else in all the world. God has entrusted us with Life itself, with forgiveness, with salvation, with eternal life.

"For those who have, more will be given..." If you receive that which God is trying to give you, you will gain everything. If you will not receive it, you finally condemn yourself by rejecting what God has tried to give to you.

The man with one talent was afraid, and justified his fear with this statement: "Master, I know that you are a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter--and I was afraid of you, so I dug a hole in the earth and hid your talent--here it is, take it back."

This encounter raises questions. First, did the servant really know the master to be a harsh

man? From what we have seen of him and the way that he treated the other two servants, he appears anything but hard. He was certainly no cold-hearted miser who counted every penny. Instead, the picture emerges of an extravagantly and even reckless master whose faith in his servants is exceeded only by his generosity.

Who is this master, anyway? In trying to make sense of Jesus' parables we always have to try to understand what it is that Jesus was trying to show his listeners. Not a prescription for ethical living or advice on investments. Jesus was trying to explain to them the nature of the Master: the nature of God. This seems to be the message of this parable: Just like that hole-in-the-ground servant, WE misjudge our Master and miss out on what our lives really could be if we would trust God and use our gifts to do what he has asked us to do: Love God, love others.

Once upon a time three children were visiting their aunt who lived in a home along the English sea coast. The three had never before visited the aunt and were thrilled to be in her home in such a beautiful place. One day the aunt bought them all new play clothes and suggested that they take a walk with the maid along the water while the aunt went off to do some errands. William rushed immediately into the water, jumping over the waves as they broke near the rocks. Mary waded through the tidal pools collecting sea stars, shells and other interesting objects along the water's edge. Phillip, realizing that the other two were getting their new clothes all dirty, stayed back with the maid and never went close to the ocean.

When the aunt returned William told her what fun it was to feel the cold water splash over his face, Mary showed her aunt all the objects that she had found, and Phillip--expecting praise--said, "And look, My clothes are perfectly dry, not a drop of water on them anywhere." "How sad," thought the aunt. "I guess that you just don't like the beach." And next year when Mary and William came to see their aunt, Phillip wasn't invited.

What messed things up for Phillip? The expectation he had of his aunt--or that we have of our God--is wrong. "Sir, I knew how tough you were. So here is your coin, all safe and sound."

William Willimon told how he first reacted to this parable by asking, "Master, How could you do this - be so harsh - to this little servant?" But as he realized the extravagant giving of the Master, Willimon came to ask, "Master, how could I do this to you and your sacrifice?"

We are ordinary people, and yet this parable declares that something extraordinary has been done to and for us. Jesus has given us the kingdom. So the question for us now and every day is: "What are we doing, what have we done, with what our Master has given us?"

Years ago a woman in William Willimon's church wasn't able to do much, but she could bake the best oatmeal cookies around. God had given her that talent. She never baked a batch of the cookies for her family or friends without also making a batch for the prisoners at the county prison camp. She would put these cookies in little packages and tie on them this message: "I know you are going through a tough time. But God loves you. God wants to be with you."

Yesterday when I saw Eunie Hewitt in Waterbury as she sat in the television room of the nursing home, she asked about how our church is doing, and she told me, "I don't do anything. But I pray for my church every day." And I told her that her prayers are part of our blessing, that she is our prayer warrior.

What are we doing with what our Master has given us?

For God so loved this world that this God acted in an amazingly extravagant and unbelievable way. God gave Jesus Christ, God's love in the flesh, to this world, not to condemn the world, that's not God's way. Instead, Jesus came that the world might be saved. We're talented folks: "What did you do with your life?" What are we doing with what our Master has given us? May God guide our hearts and our actions and find joy in them! Amen.