

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Nov. 16, 2014

## **Watching and Waiting**

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Matthew 25:14-30

Each week as I prepare to write a sermon, I look at the suggested scripture readings for the day. Then I think about these suggestions and what they say, I choose one or more of the readings, and then start to compose my thoughts about the selected scripture. As I have told you before, I have a very extensive library of theological material, including sermons given by other pastors. I have it all on a spreadsheet and can quickly search to see what resources I have which may be relevant to the scripture that I have chosen.

We all know the parable which I have just read aloud from Matthew 25. It is familiar so presumably I should have a lot of information in my files about it. Right?

**Wrong!** There is absolutely nothing there.

Why would that be the case? The reason most probably is the timing of this particular scripture reading in the church calendar. It falls in November when most churches are conducting their annual pledge drives and pastors are encouraging their congregations to increase their giving if at all possible.

In most Bible translations, the parable is called the Parable of the Talents. In the NIV translation which we have in the pews, it is called the Parable of the Bags of Gold -- but it is not about money. It is about the responsible stewardship of God's gifts. There is a big difference between the two. Nevertheless, the two are easily confused which is probably why so few pastors preach on this parable at this time of year.

Well rest easy. I am not about to hand out commitment cards or ask you to make a big pledge to support this church. I don't need to do that. You support the church well and I am sure that if we were to need a greater level of financial support over and above what you currently provide, you would step up to the plate and find a way to provide it.

That said the parable's message is really one of watching and waiting for Jesus' return and in being good stewards of all that he has given to us, our talents.

Biblically, in monetary terms, the bags of money, the talents, were huge amounts of money. A talent was a measure of weight, not a unit of currency or a coin, although it is true that later a coin was minted which was called a talent. The two are not the same thing.

According to the Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary the talents mentioned in the parable were approximately equal in value to seventy five pounds of silver worth about 6000 denari, or about \$247,200, nearly a quarter of a million dollars. Thus the landowner in the parable gave his servants close to two million dollars to invest in his absence.

The analogy to talents as we understand the word today is that the three servants varied greatly in their innate talent to do things, just as each of us varies in our talents. God has given each and every one of us different talents and expects us to make the most of those talents. Some of us have talents as teachers or farmers or railroad workers or auto mechanics or other things. I was blessed with talents in science and engineering and think that I was reasonable good at using those talents. But my talents as a farmer are hopeless. I can grow weeds but not much else.

God gave each of us talents and expects us to use those talents to the best of our ability for the benefit of his kingdom. That is what the Parable of the Talents is telling us.

The landowner who is going on the journey is Jesus. He is going to the Father, but he will return. In his absence he expects each of us to use the talents that have been given to us in the furtherance of his kingdom. The three servants each have different talents, just as each of us does. How well we manage our talents is up to each of us and when Christ returns we will be judged on our stewardship of what was given to us.

The servant who was given five talents in the parable probably set up some kind of business and made a large and profitable capital investment. In terms of talents as we understand the word today, he might be a great theologian such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great German Lutheran pastor who staunchly opposed Adolph Hitler and his Nazi dictatorship. He might be someone like Albert Einstein who developed the theory of relativity, a pillar of modern physics. These two men and hundreds of other

men and women used their talents for the benefit of everyone and continued to do so throughout their lives.

The servant who was given two talents perhaps reflects most of us more closely. We aren't Einsteins or Bonhoeffers but most of us have done our best with the talents we were given and, even if we are retired from our life's work, we continue to serve the Lord through volunteer activity.

The third servant, who was given one talent, might be called lazy or over cautious. He was afraid of doing anything with what he had been given and he hid it while awaiting his master's return.

Do you know anyone like that? I am sure that you do. But, you might ask, "What's wrong with his being cautious?"

Isn't discretion a virtue? Isn't caution? Isn't carefulness?

Quoting Walter Brueggemann, et al\*, "... with this third servant virtues became vices. Prudence and wariness easily became self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear and the servant ends up refusing the risk of trading in the market place. By preserving exactly what had been entrusted to him he can at least minimally stay in the good graces of his master – or so he thinks." Note that in the parable, the master says to the first two servants, "Well done good and faithful servant!" Each is given praise and greater responsibilities, just as each of us is expected to continue in our service to the Lord and to magnify that service as best we can.

The third servant is called wicked and lazy. Like many modern counterparts, he did nothing with his talent. He will not be looked upon with favor at the time of judgment.

As an aside, did you note the joke in the master's comments to him? "You should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest."

In those times Jews avoided charging interest to each other. The reference to interest may well be a suggestion that he should have invested the money with gentiles.

*"To the one choosing security over risk, the Lord remains a hard master, one who seems to reap where he does not sow and gather where he has not planted. Fearfulness breeds more fear. The prospect of joy and the freedom of response are gone. But those who risk discover a Lord ready to share the delight of his presence and*

*participation in his mission. They discover a link with the teller of the story, who knows all about risks and whose love is neither prudent nor calculating.” \**

**Amen!**

\*Walter Brueggemann, et al, Texts for Preaching – Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995.

(Note: All scriptural quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible)