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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28A)

November 16, 2014

Text: Matthew 25:14–30

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Jesus continues to teach about the end of the world in today's gospel reading from Matthew 25. Last week, Jesus taught about the end of all things using the parable of the 10 virgins. Through that parable, we learned that Christ's Church is to wait in joyful preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Today's parable also focuses on the Church and how she is to live while she waits for the return of the Lord Jesus. This is a kingdom parable. It applies to us directly and specifically as God's people, members of His holy Church through baptism and faith in Jesus.

In the parable, three servants are given talents by their master. The servants represent the Church and her membership. The master going on a journey is the Lord Jesus. The time between the master's departure and his return represents the time of the Church, this period of grace between the Lord's ascension to the Father's right hand and His return on the Last Day. We are living in that time right now. It's the time of living by faith and holiness, hearing God's Word and receiving the Sacraments.

What's most remarkable is that Jesus gives His people gifts, talents they are called in the parable. In the ancient world, a talent was the largest measure of money available. Estimates vary but it appears that a talent was roughly equivalent to 6,000 denarii. A denarius was one day's wage for a worker. So a talent is the same as 6,000 days wages or 16½ years of salary, if you worked 7 days a week. To be given a talent was no small gift. Just multiply what you make every year times 16 and then you'll better understand how significant a gift it is. One servant was given 5 talents (80 years salary), another was given 2 talents (32 years salary), another 1 talent (16 years).

The gifts given to the Church are no mere trifles. According to Jesus, the master in the parable, they are talent-sized gifts, extraordinary in their value and worth. You and I know what these gifts are, the gospel of Jesus is all its forms: God's inspired Word, the sacraments of baptism, confession and absolution, the Lord's Supper, prayer, in

particular the Lord's Prayer, the Church with her ministry and fellowship, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the hope of the resurrection, the new birth in water and spirit ... well, you get the point. Christ's Church is a gifted Church. God's people, individually and collectively, are enriched and blessed with much grace.

So, on the one hand, every Christian stands equal to every other Christian; all share equally in a common salvation accomplished through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. On the other hand, there is a great deal of diversity of giftedness within Christ's Church. Jesus gives His abounding gifts to you according to your various abilities. All of those gifts are to be used fully and faithfully.

The first two servants in the parable received their precious gifts and put those gifts to work. Five talents grew to 10 talents when it was all said and done. Two talents grew to 4 talents. We aren't told what they did or even how they used the talents. But they lived and acted in faith knowing the master was coming back. Their desire was to show a return on the Lord's gift. They were faithful.

The third servant simply buried his gift. Why? He tells us in vs. 25. Fear. "So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." This third servant didn't want to lose anything so he wasn't going to risk using it. Fear of the master's disapproval crippled him from using the master's gift for good.

On the one hand, you and I should be able to sympathize with this third servant. Did the master leave him with any instructions? None. No quotas, or goals, or benchmarks were provided. The master, who represents Jesus, simply gives an enormous gift and says go and be faithful. And then he leaves. That's all it says in vs. 15! He leaves.

Can you imagine a God like this? A God who gives talent-sized gifts but doesn't manage how they should be used! All Jesus tells His apostles before He ascends to the Father's right hand is to make disciples by preaching and baptizing in His name. He doesn't tell them how long sermons should be. How much teaching each new member should receive before baptized, before receiving Holy Communion. Have you ever wondered how much you should pray? Jesus doesn't tell us. He gives us the Lord's Prayer but you can pray that in less than 30 seconds! There are no instructions on how much or how little Christians should give of their material resources to support the work of the Church. Must the money stay local, go national, or international? We aren't told.

Jesus does tell you, me, and His entire Church that He'll be with them unto the ages of ages. Even that promise isn't spelled out too much. We later find the Church being filled with the Holy Spirit through preaching and baptism. But there's lots of wiggle room to live as God's Spirit-filled Christians.

Faith in the goodness of the master moves the first two servants to put their talents to work. They were faithful with their talents; they used their abilities for the benefit of the master's house and property. And the talents grew. On the Day of Judgment, they received the master's approval. Why was Jesus pleased with these servants? He tells them in vs. 21 & 23, "You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much." Faith. Faith is pleasing to our Lord Jesus Christ. The amount lost or gained isn't the issue. They were faithful.

The third servant was paralyzed into inaction. He even seems to be afraid of the master Himself. He calls him a "hard man" in vs. 24. That's interesting in light of the fact that this so-called hard man just gave 16 years of wages! At any rate, the third servant did nothing for fear of losing what was entrusted to him. In the end, he lost everything because of his fear and unfaithfulness to the master and his generous gifts.

Listen to the warning Jesus gives in vs. 26–30:

But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

It would be quite easy, at this point in the sermon, to begin enumerating various areas in which we could apply this parable. We could talk about how you use your money, time, and possessions. Do you give faithfully to the Church? How about your time?

What about Bible study? Do you read Scripture and live according to it? And what about prayer? Jesus strongly implies that His people will pray daily, "give us this day our daily bread..." Well, do you pray daily? Are you praying for family, friends,

government, Christians around the world, especially those suffering persecution, good weather, good harvests, a strong economy, Church leaders, etc.

And what about evangelism and sharing your faith with unbelievers? When was the last time you had a conversation with an unbeliever about Jesus? Have you invited anyone to Church lately? Shared the Gospel? Prayed for the increase of God's kingdom here and abroad?

You can find on sermon after sermon on these kinds of things on the radio and internet. Books aplenty have been published that tell Christians how they should go about using their talents. The trouble with so many of these kinds of resources is that they leave you hopelessly enslaved with guilt and fear under the Law. They seldom teach you that the Master is not a hard man but one who gives graciously, generously, you might even say hilariously. What is so often forgotten is that Jesus works in us and through to accomplish His good and gracious will.

Dear saints of God, I would have you hear this parable and be encouraged to live out your most holy faith in confidence and joy; confidence and joy that are found in the Lord Jesus, not you or your works. Yes. We must heed the warning that unfaithfulness is destructive to our faith and relationship to Jesus. But know and be strengthened by the Lord Jesus, who gives you the treasures of His kingdom freely and graciously. Live faithfully in that grace. You need not be afraid, as the third servant in the parable was. Jesus isn't interested so much in a tally sheet of what was gained or lost; He's interested in you. And He desires that you enter into the joy of His kingdom, now in this life, and fully and completely in the life to come.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.