

Lectionary 33 A 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

November 19, 2017

Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. About a month ago, on October 15, I spoke about this section of readings— parables in Matthew’s gospel— which end in judgment, with winners and losers. Today’s parable is one example of that. Last week’s parable is another example. Next week’s parable is another example.

This is a peculiar feature of Matthew’s gospel. The image of an unforgiving master, does not fit nicely with the message of grace for sinners that we find in the other gospels and in Paul’s letters. Sometimes the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel wants to warn us against our own tendency to rush to judgment. The parables show us that sometimes we get it wrong. In next Sunday’s parable, both the wicked and the righteous will ask exactly the same question: *When was it that we saw you? When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?* How we judge is not necessarily how God will judge.

Another peculiarity of Matthew’s gospel is that it is the only book of the New Testament— aside from Revelation— that uses the word “talent.” Talent is a Greek word that is a unit of weight. It was very important concept in the world of Jesus— in that whole Mediterranean world, for a long time, across a lot of cultures. So we can’t be sure exactly how much it was. One of my best reference resources says that it was about 35 pounds. Which is what I’ve got here. [dumbbell] But a lot of people use different sources, and make it about double this amount. Hellenistic sources span centuries and span continents. And they don’t all agree. When someone says a talent was equivalent to 6,000 drachmae, that only helps you if you know how much a drachmae weighed. I’m showing you what a talent was originally like. This, by the way, is my “talent show.”

So a “talent” was a unit of weight. It might typically refer to a chunk of gold or another precious metal. In the book of Revelation, there are hailstones that weigh a talent. Not something that you’d want to fall on your head.

So in the parable, a master summons three slaves and entrusts his property to them. Five talents to one. Two talents to another. And one talent to a third. So these are sums of great wealth. Piles of gold. And of course, one of them buries it in the ground.

One of my colleagues, Pastor David Lose, the senior pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, writes that this is a parable about what happens when we live in fear. Jesus does not say that the master is harsh. The first two slaves– the ones who invest– do not seem to be afraid of the master. But here is what the third slave says to the boss: *“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.”* The master does not seem to feel flattered by this. *You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?* So the third slave seems to be acting out of fear and dread. He won’t even invest the money with the bankers. But buries it in the ground.

Sometime in the 1400’s this Greek word “talent” which had become a Latin word “talent” evolved into our meaning. Talent– like talent show, like a talent for music, or a talent for speaking, or a talent for gardening. Because the original word was concerned with weight, in medieval Latin, talent had come to mean a leaning, an inclination, a tendency, a pull. But the modern use of the word derives directly from this parable, today’s gospel. And the exhortation to make the most of what God has entrusted to you. I think it’s cute when churches urge their members to contribute “Time, Talent, and Treasure” – the three T’s. Have you heard that before? In the original sense, a talent was literally a treasure. In today’s gospel, literally a buried treasure.

Our treasure, our talent is this congregation. In some ways, we are surely tempted to bury this talent in the ground. To preserve what we have by receding behind walls. That is what is happening to many congregations. And not only congregations, but many social institutions. We live in a nation and a culture that exalts individualism and that turns away from the communities that nurture and guide individuals. In The New York Times yesterday, [David Brooks wrote](#) that our society is a tree, and the leaves are growing faster than the roots that are necessary for the leaves to thrive. The leaves are the pleasures, rights, and freedoms of individualism. The roots are neighborhoods, unions, clubs, congregations, PTA meetings. The roots are withering. And so like the man in the parable, in scary and discouraging times, we may become afraid. We may bury our treasure in the ground.

We at Dove of Peace are not doing that. Every day we sweep the steps, we raise the flag, we turn on the lights, and we open the doors. And we invite all to come. Come and find hope. Come and find connection. Come and taste that the Lord is good. Just three weeks ago we commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, with a fairly robust proclamation of the good news and the meaning of our heritage for the future, and a taste of community. And bratwurst and beer.

This coming year, 2018, will be another amazing year. A fairly dramatic year as we exhale out our tired old pipe organ, and inhale it again, renewed for many more adventures and many more decades.

In the mail, our members and associates are receiving an invitation to state our intentions to support Dove of Peace in 2018. We find that it is always better to think and pray about what we share with the church. To do it deliberately. To do it with intention. Not just haphazardly. Not just opening up your wallet or purse to see what's loose. But to plan. Or in terms of the parable today. To invest.

In the mail, our members and associates will receive a form to complete, and a cross made from cardstock. "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his followers. And you can write a word or words, a name or names, for Jesus on this cross and return it with your statement of intention. And these crosses and the many, many names for Jesus will be mounted on the Luther Rose banner, as we move toward a brand new year at Dove of Peace. Sweeping the steps, raising the flag, turning on the lights, and opening the doors.

Our second reading today was from what I believe to be the earliest and most original writing in the entire New Testament. Paul wrote these words to the Thessalonians, but I fancy that he might have written them for us: *God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.* As we move from 2017 into a new year, let us not bury our treasure. But invest it. Encourage one another, and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. Amen.