

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 19, 2023 – The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 25:14-30 – The Parable of the Talents
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This morning's lesson from Matthew is another in a series of parables that we find near the end of this Gospel, just before Jesus faces crucifixion. Last week we heard the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, and next week we will hear the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. This morning we have the Parable of the Talents. All these parables deal with what it means to follow Jesus and to be prepared for his coming again to establish God's kingdom forever.

Let's look at today's parable and try to untangle its meaning. A "talent" was a unit of money, a large amount of money, worth roughly what a laborer could earn in 15 years. Our modern word "talent" is derived from this parable. We use the word to refer to the gifts and skills a person possesses or, from a faith perspective, has received from God. Many people interpret this parable to mean that we should discover the talents God has given us and use them wisely, to the glory of God, rather than waste them. This is a good lesson, of course. We should be good stewards of the gifts God has given us. But we don't want to reduce the lesson of the parable to something absurd – for instance, the idea that you or I will be thrown into the outer darkness at Christ's second coming because we had talents for music or art or cooking or child-rearing that we failed to use and develop.

What if we consider this parable as a story about what the followers of Jesus do with the message of the Gospel as they wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven?

The first thing we must see is what a huge gift God has given to the people called to follow Jesus, to us. Fifteen to seventy-five years wages! And plenty of time to do something with this huge gift, the treasure of the Gospel, the teachings of Jesus. Many of our neighbors lack any religious education or faith community. When we think that we might not have been blessed as we have been with our church and its teachings, doesn't it help us see what a treasure we have been given?

In many contexts Jesus teaches that it isn't enough just to hear his message. We must act on his words. The Parable of the Talents teaches a similar lesson. The man with five talents and the man with two talents did something with their gift. They each doubled their money in trade. They took the treasure of the Gospel message, acted on it, and the treasure grew. God was pleased and said, "You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

But the man who had been given one talent hid his talent in the ground, so it hadn't even earned interest. His excuse was that he was afraid because the master was unjust, "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." When we look at the story, we have to wonder how this man came to see his master this way. After all, the master gave all three men huge gifts of money and then went away for a long time, trusting his slaves to do whatever they wanted to do with his property. Nothing harsh or unjust in the master. Why think that he is unjust and act accordingly?

This parable is placed in the Gospel just before the account of the end of Jesus' life. It reminds us of a hard truth about human beings. People do sometimes see what is good and call it evil. People do hurt and destroy innocent people, sometimes "in the name of God." It happened to Jesus. It happens still. The parable teaches that for this there will be judgment: exclusion from the joys of the master, and instead, darkness.

In many places in the Bible there are teachings and visions of God's final judgment of human beings, such as in this parable and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. We are involved, day by day, in a process of becoming more or less like the image of God we have been created to be. In the Parable of the Talents, the judgment came at the end, when the master returned. But day by day, all the while the master was gone, each of the three men chose what to do with the gifts they had been given. The sum of all those choices was what it was when the master returned.

I believe that on our spiritual journeys when we act on the teachings of Jesus, for the love of God and our neighbor and the right love of ourselves, and when we spend our lives in prayer and praise, in charity and in good stewardship, all these activities increase and grow. It becomes easier to love, easier to turn our compassion into action, simpler to understand God's leading. Even repentance becomes more possible. But if we fail to do what Jesus taught us to do, we gradually lose the potential for good that we were given.

In the parable as the one talent is taken from the wicked slave and given to the man with ten talents, the master comments: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." This may sound harsh, but it isn't arbitrary and unjust. It is the consequence of what we choose to do with the Gospel message we have been blessed to receive.

This past week you have received St. Columba's annual stewardship letter and pledge card for 2024. Today's parable is an excellent lesson through which to consider what we will give to financially support the church. I believe the best foundation for giving is gratitude to God for the blessings God has given us. Think of what a blessing St. Columba's Church is in your life – the worship services, the faith community, the building in which we gather and share our lives. It may help you to remember what you missed while the church was essentially "closed" during the pandemic. In thanksgiving for what you have received and what you are receiving now here at St. Columba's, make a thank-offering to the Lord.

The Gospel always challenges us to look to the welfare of others and to act for the good of others. By keeping this parish in good financial condition through our gifts we are doing what we can to ensure the future of the parish. That means that St. Columba's will be here for the followers of Jesus who join us now and for those who will come after us. We will pass on the blessings we have received and make room for the Spirit to lead new people to our church.

Today's lesson reminds us that in our lives with God we have the responsibility to make choices for God, to be partners with God in our transformation into the people God wants us to be, people who give and work for the Gospel of Christ, who can be recognized as the sisters and brothers of Jesus, children not of darkness, but of light. May we be such people. Amen.