

November 15, 2020

Matthew 25: 14-30

Pastor Ann Hultquist

We're coming to the end of the Church Year, which I'm sure is one milestone that most of us are not focused on at all! As much as we would all like to see 2020 in the rearview mirror, we're not thinking of a New Year just yet. But one more Sunday--Christ the King--next week, and then we will begin the season of Advent. Each year we 'start over' if you will, journeying with Jesus from birth through his life and ministry, death and resurrection; and then the life of the early church.

Along the way we spend a lot of time wondering together just what the Gospel good news of God's entry into our world means for us and what it has to do with our lives today. Healings, preaching, Jesus' encounters with all kinds of people, that's what we are used to hearing. But at the end of the Church Year each year we hear some parables of Jesus that are jarring. Last week, wise and foolish bridesmaids; many years we hear the story of the division of the sheep and goats; today what is often called the parable of the talents. They are all parables that challenge us with a sense of urgency about life that we don't often feel...except perhaps during this year.

Life in all its fullness and all its painful brokenness has been set clearly before us in the last 9 months, hasn't it? Both the stories of love and self-sacrifice and the wrenching stories of COVID's unpredictable and arbitrary attacks on everyone and anyone have made many of us "consider our days" as our Psalm hymn today encourages. It is not an easy mental and emotional journey to make, is it; to take a long look at our own lives and who we want to be, especially if life suddenly changes or ends.

"It is *as if* someone was going on a journey," Jesus says today. That *as if* is important, because there isn't some easy interpretation for what follows. Jesus is not the Master here, and neither is God. The parable Jesus is about to tell is a story of an exaggerated reckoning, not a quick lesson on what happens when Christ comes again.

It is *as if* a very,very, very wealthy person decides to go on a journey. Before leaving, the bank balance is divided among three servants to manage. ‘Talents’ were a way of grouping money in the ancient world, and it’s estimated that one talent was worth about twenty year’s wages. So, the first servant is entrusted with about **100** years of wages; the second about **40** years worth, and the last about **20** years worth. This is not like paying the neighborhood kid to mow your lawn when you go on vacation; these are vast sums of money! And this CEO is amazingly generous, trusting these people to do something with what they are given--perhaps to do what the CEO would have done if they had stayed around running the show.

We learn that the one who was given 100 years of wages uses them to develop a cool new technology that enables people to carry around little phone camera in their pockets. Pretty soon everyone in the world buys one and uses them to share photos of their pets and what they eat and to get into political arguments. She doubles the money that was given to her!

The second one decides to go the food route and uses the 40 years of wages to start a chain of really fancy stores that just serve coffee. No one thinks anyone will pay \$6 for coffee in a paper cup, but he laughs all the way to the bank, also doubling the money in no time.

The third one is nervous about this whole responsibility thing. Certainly not going to spend it on something frivolous like a phone or an overpriced latte. Too much risk is scary; so away the money goes in a shoebox under the bed.

For whatever reason, it takes the CEO a long time to come back; long enough maybe that these three thought they’d been left to their own devices. But no one takes the money and runs, do they? They’ve taken a look at their lives and made decisions, so when the reckoning does come, they are prepared.

Even the third fearful one is prepared. The problem is a misjudgment of the master. For whatever reason, the third person has decided that the master is harsh and unethical--why? It seems as though generous and giving to a fault are better descriptors. The three servants are invited to follow that lead, to tend to the gifts

they've been given and to see their time not as something to be endured but instead to be shared, grown, and tended joyfully.

“It is *as if*” Jesus says. We are invited through that *as if* to take a look at our whole life, pandemic or not. How have we lived...how do we *want* to live? With fear, fear that leads us to guard all that we've been given, sure that God can't possibly continue to provide what we need? Or with openness and joy, and a willingness to share ourselves and what we have with love and trust in Christ, who loved and *loves* unconditionally?

Loved so much, gifted so well, the question becomes not “How much do I give?” but “How do I want to live?” I hope that is a question you've been wrestling with over the last few weeks.

You've heard Mission Moments from Nick, Renee, Roger, and Katy during online worship; you've seen and heard clearly how we are *Still Worshipping, Growing, and Going* even in this challenging time; you've thought about what you've been given, you've heard what your gifts do in this congregation and beyond.

We've had a hiccup in our schedule, thanks to COVID, so our final mailing that includes a commitment (or pledge) card will be sent out to most of you this week. I want to encourage you to return that card or fill a form out online from the church website--the ministry we share here at Augustana makes such a difference! Need a card, please contact the church office.

Your giving changes the world—think of that family in Africa who receives food during this horrific pandemic; or the neighbors who come to our own Soup Shelf for what they need to eat; or that grieving person who is supported by our congregation during their loss; or the person who walked away from church a long time ago who now finds a welcome online with Augustana.

Giving changes the world...and giving changes you.

When you open your hand, you become a giver and not a fearful grasper; full of the love and grace of Christ that's been showered on you with generous abandon—and you witness that you trust in God's ability to provide and care for you even as you share all that has been entrusted to you.

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