



Pastor Ken's Sermon

SERMON – 24TH PENTECOST

MATTHEW 25:14-30

NOVEMBER 15, 2020

“TALENT”

Readers of this parable of the talents will gravitate to that word “talent” and from it assume this story is about accomplishment. That association is not out of place – the origin of the English word “talent” can be traced to this parable. A master entrusts his servants with certain measures of money. No other instructions are given, but the assumption is that the entrusting carries with it the expectation of some sort of productive use. Not surprising given that one talent was the equivalent of 15 years wages for a laborer of the ancient near East.

Our understanding today of the word talent (a special aptitude, a unique skill) arises from two words in our lesson today – translated for us as “ability” and “to work”. Call talent “applied ability.” How many times have we discovered, perhaps of ourselves but usually someone else, that they could do something heretofore unrecognized and so conclude they have “a hidden talent?” Yet we don’t want our understanding of this story to be dominated by that word, to reach for old clichés like “*to one whom much is entrusted...much is expected*” and reduce Christian faith into a talent contest.

Jesus is not grading us – our Master upon his return will not belike that infamous “American Idol” judge Simon Cowell – ready to heap praise or ream us out good. Our master is Jesus after all – who made it quite clear he came not to save the righteous but sinners and who warned the religiously successful of his day – the Jewish Pharisees and Scribes - that tax collectors and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of God ahead of them. Nor should the association of talent with money impel us to treat this exclusively as a lesson on the use of wealth. The Bible in general and Jesus in particular has plenty to say about the use of wealth – in a nutshell what it and he says is that those who enjoy it should be wary of it because of how easily it can lure our hearts to seek only more of it. Jesus elsewhere said a servant cannot have “two masters.”

Disassociating this story from money is hard to do since it mentions profit and interest and harvests. If this is not exclusively a story about ability or money – as though we could “talent” our way into God’s good graces or buy our way in, what is it about? It is about grace, and that is what makes it a good story to ponder as we ponder how we will dedicate ourselves to the master’s work through our giving. Please notice that grace – and everything in this story was supplied by the master.

We know little of the servants save they wouldn’t have been servants if not chosen to be part of the master’s enterprise. The goal of the master, as we eventually discover, is not profit, but the desire to share his happiness with those servants. Ability in the servants is recognized – but it is not determinative of who the master will share his joy with. In the end, all will share in that equally no matter the extent of their ability. So be it sizeable or modest, radiant or flickering, trust in the master is trust that brings a person into their Lord’s happiness.

Given this story ends with clear allusions to eternity – with the servant characterized as lazy being consigned to an “outer darkness”, we’ve no choice but to conclude that our eternal happiness is predicated on our present action which is itself predicated on our understanding of who Jesus is. If a person looks at Jesus and sees a “hard man” - demanding, deceitful, domineering – then he simply has a wrong conception of Him – such a person is already in darkness and likely to see that darkness intensify. Faith increases a person and what he or she can do – disbelief, distrust of God, diminishes a person. Christians give because they believe. They give intentionally, regularly, generously. They give ...and they grow in happiness. The gospel of Matthew, of which the parables of chapter 25 form a grand summary begins with the declaration of John the Baptist in chapter 3:2 *“repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.”*

Notwithstanding the image of the master as having “gone away” or a bridegroom who “was delayed”, Matthew says the kingdom of God has come to earth in Jesus. Those Jesus calls he changes – he turns their orientation in life to things that the world either cannot understand or will not embrace – kindness, forgiveness, and charity among them. Changing our values, priorities and mannerisms in life is the very “ability” repentance brings. Those whom the king calls, the king equips. Some 5...some 3...some 1, but all are equipped to be the “little Christs” Luther so famously described a Christian as. The parable of the talents calls upon each little Christ to give their Lord Christ no little devotion. So, give your giving your utmost. This parable, despite its use of numbers, does not establish some sort of quota system – giving is not a number but a disposition. But it is eager and energetic, and it aims to be the best it can be.

Lutheranism arose out of a debate over the use of money. In Luther’s time many felt giving alms, as charity was called, paved one’s path to forgiveness and eternal life. Luther was quite blunt in his assessment of the use of money that way – saying in his 95 Theses, *“Christians are to be taught that he who sees need and passes it by, yet gives money for indulgences, does not buy God’s favor but God’s wrath.”* Like I said, he was blunt. In Luther’s time many believed in the complete renunciation of wealth – that poverty was the same thing as holiness.

Luther believed however, that all creation was given for both our enjoyment and our stewardship – our care. He said *“if silver and gold are things evil in themselves, then those who keep away from them deserved to be praised. But if they are good creatures of God, which we can use both for the needs of our neighbor and for the glory of God, is not a person silly, yes, even ungrateful, if he refrains from using them as though they were evil.”* Our story from Matthew is perhaps best understood by way of one word “entrusted.” Often, when we bring our offerings to the altar, we sing a “little song” – a canticle that says *“we give thee but thine own, what ere the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone, a trust O Lord from thee.”*

The inspiration for that “little song” is a “little parable” – which teaches us it is no little thing to want to see ourselves as the happiness of our Master. What we do for Christ and those neighbors who bear his image is never really given away – but accumulates till that day when the giver is greeted by the most wonderful words any ear could hear... *“well done good and faithful servant...you have been faithful in a few things, I will put you over many things...come and share your master’s happiness”!*

AMEN