

November 13, 2011  
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Matthew 25:14-30

The challenge before us.

Our reading this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew.

As we prepare ourselves to hear this morning's reading it is important for us to know that Jesus has come to Jerusalem – he is preparing himself and his disciples for his pending death. After teaching at the temple – Jesus and his disciples have gone over to the Mount of Olives. Jesus is speaking to them privately. Their conversation has turned to the future – to the end of this age – and to the full manifestation of the kingdom of heaven – the kingdom of God – that Jesus has told them about.

After saying to them that no one will know when this age will end and the 'kingdom will come' in its fullness – Jesus tells them to be ready – for it will come un-expectedly.

Our reading this morning is often referred to as the parable of the talents. Being a parable it is a story that would resonate with Jesus' first century listeners – it would be a story that they could relate to easily. It would also say something much bigger. The parable of the talents says something about Jesus – the master – who will entrust all things into the hands of his church – before leaving. The parable says something to us – as individuals – but more importantly – as the church about how we are to live – as we wait for Christ's return.

**Prayer**

**Scripture**

Many of us have heard this parable before. Most of us are at least somewhat familiar with it and those of us that are have already assigned some sort of meaning to it. As soon as it was read – you said to yourself – he is going to tell me that God has given (entrusted) each of us specific – gifts and talents – and like the first two servants – we are to invest what we have been given – we are to use it – we are to make sure that we have something to show – at the end – when we are called to make an accounting before the Master.

You – have already went on with your day – thinking about what is next – a meal – a football game – some outing with friends. (Hang in here with me before you give up.)

Others of you are stuck – and have been for years and years – in the end of this passage – bound up in feeling sorry or even identifying with the last servant and feeling that the Master is indeed harsh and demanding. Some of you are worried about whether you have done enough – or can do enough – you fear the possibility that there are those who will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and the gnashing of teeth.

You – have already been shut down by your feelings of righteous anger toward the Master – or by the overwhelming sense that you are unsure what exactly you need to do to keep from the fate of the last servant. (I would ask you to hang in there with me as well.)

Have I exposed all our prejudice toward this passage? Did I leave anybody out?

My hope is that once we can identify our experience and our thoughts with this passage it might be easier to look at it with some fresh eyes.

The parable starts by saying,

*‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them...’*

The ‘it’ – as in ‘for it is as if’ – refers to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ mission and ministry has been to proclaim this radical kingdom – this kingdom – that is not rules and regulations – it is not about customs and traditions – instead it is about love – and justice – and mercy – it is about living in authentic relationship with our God and with one another.

The ‘man’ – is Jesus. Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples behind. He will be crucified. – He will die. He will be buried. He will be raised from the dead. He will ascend to sit on the right hand of the Father.

*‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves ...’*

It is right here that we begin to form some negative imagines of this ‘man’ – he has slaves – which is to say – that he owns people – that they have had to give up their identity – and their freedom – in order to be at the beckon call of another.

But yet there is something different here about the relationship – different in our experience – as those who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and not the 1<sup>st</sup> century – different from those of us who have witnessed the lingering effects of slavery in our nation. ‘The man – summoned his slaves – we are told – and entrusted his property to them’. And the property entrusted to them is no small amount – it is an enormous estate.

A talent represents a particular amount of material – it would be the equivalent of approximately what an average worker would make in 15 years. So let’s say that today that amount is \$30,000 per year. One talent would equal  $\$30,000 \times 15$  or \$450,000. Therefore the slave who was entrusted with 5 talents had been entrusted with an amount of \$2,250,000, the one with 2 talents - \$900,000 and the one with 1 talent a measly \$450,000. The man’s estate – would have been worth over 3.5 million dollars.

Notice also here that the slaves are not given the ‘talents’ but instead they are ‘entrusted’ with the talents. Notice that the ‘man’ does not give specific instructions about what the slaves are to do with the talents. Notice too that the ‘man’ understands the God given ability of each of his slaves – gives them only what they have the ability to deal with.

It is after the man goes away that we find out what each of the slaves does with their talents. The one with 5 trades and makes 5 more. The one with 2 does the same doubling his 2. The one with one talent though digs a hole and buries his talent.

After a long time – we are told – the man – who is now referred to as the ‘Master’ returns and calls his slaves in to find out how things have gone. The story gets off to a great start – the one with five reports he has made five more – the ‘Master’ is exuberant – he says to the slave – *‘well done good and trustworthy slave – you have been trustworthy in a few things – I will put you in charge of many things – enter into the joy of your Master’*.

The slave who has two – tells the ‘Master’ that he too has doubled what had been entrusted to him. Once again the Master replies - *‘well done good and trustworthy slave – you have been trustworthy in a few things – I will put you in charge of many things – enter into the joy of your Master’*.

All this changes – when the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave makes his report. The slave prefaces his report by saying to the 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 hid your talent in the ground. Here is what is yours.’*

It is here that I think the question has to be asked – as we place ourselves in the parable – as we think about our relationship and responsibility to the ‘Master’ – that we have to ask the question – is discipleship – being followers of Jesus – is it all about making sure that we not only use what we have been entrusted with – our financial and other resources – but those other talents – abilities. Is it all about not only making sure we are using them – but that we are using them in such a way that they are producing more?

Is discipleship about more than being faithful – being successful? At the end of our life – when we add up the tally – is it not enough to say – well I didn't do any good – but I didn't harm either.

If our salvation is about what we produce with what we have been given – aren't we back to works righteousness – having to earn our salvation by what we do – and if we are saved by our works – is God's grace – the mercy, forgiveness, and love – that we find in Jesus' life and death is that somehow then not effective – so that in the end it's not about what Jesus does – but about what we do.

It is here too where we need to challenge the assumptions of the 3<sup>rd</sup> slave. Is it true that the master is a harsh man – reaping where he did not sow – gathering where he did not scatter?

Isn't what we see in this parable a 'master' who is generous – intrusting all he has to his slaves? Doesn't this 'master' know his slaves – and give them only what they have the ability to manage?

Doesn't the master continue to entrust to his slaves – those first two – all he has – and all they have produced by their work?

Hasn't the 'master' changed the relationship between himself and the first two slaves – saying – “Enter into the joy of your master” – putting the two on an equal footing with the master?

The bigger point for us in this parable is not about being successful – returning to the master with a great accounting – but it is about the willingness of disciples to risk – what they have been entrusted with – for the sake of the kingdom.

Jesus is getting ready to risk his life – to give it all away – for the sake of this kingdom. He has told those who have chosen to follow him that they will have to take risks for the sake of the kingdom – that they will have to become servants instead of masters – that they will have to lose everything in order to gain everything – that they will have to deny themselves – that they will have to sacrifice and suffer.

This parable – is not only a parable for us – those who sit in the pews – but it is a parable for the church as well – for this church as well – we have been entrusted with the message of the kingdom – the message of God’s love and mercy. We have been called to live out justice – to make sure that the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed – to make sure that there is opportunity for all people to find meaning in life and living – through meaningful work – through the sharing of community – in the joy of everyday beauty.

Sometimes we are brave – and we take great risk – we walk in solidarity with people of color so that all God’s children might know the same rights and freedoms as we know – we give unselfishly of ourselves so that others might have food – clothes – medicines – knowing that we will go without ourselves – we dare to be the voice of the voiceless and the strength of the powerless.

But often times we are not. Sometimes we want to hold closely to what we have been given – we become fearful that we will lose some of what has been entrusted to us – but we can't – the kingdom of heaven – it is known by the risk that we take in order that the riches of God's love in Jesus Christ might be known – by all.

The challenge before us – as the community of faith that calls itself Echo Hill – is not to become afraid to use – to invest – to give away – what has been entrusted to us. We cannot become comfortable in this building – we cannot think that our once a week worship will define our Christian duty – we cannot only study – without living and giving – risking everything – not to become successful – but to be faithful servants of our master. Amen.