

22 Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28 – Year A – November 13, 2011

Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

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Over the years, as I was growing up, I remember a variety of houseplants coming and going. My mom's response was always unenthusiastic. Upon arrival, a place would be found for the green interloper, but after a while, like any unwelcome guest, the plant would somehow get the message and give up. One of the strangest plants that passed through our home had long tendrils that seemed to move towards any warm body brave enough to sit in the armchair by the window. Given the circumstances, we never could figure out if the plant was hunting down food, seeking comfort in its exile, or offering solace.

Life in Christ is a much bigger adventure than braving my mom's sitting room plants. We're constantly invited to take risks, and then take responsibility for our actions or their consequences. We're commanded to love one another as Christ loves us. One thing that stands out is the surprising way that God works in and through our lives. Given the number of times words like astonished and amazed pop up in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and teaching, He really did find surprising ways to open our hearts and minds to new possibilities. Jesus uses parables to stimulate our brains and prompt us to think through our faith, our beliefs, our daily choices, **and** our lives. What **is** surprising is how often you and I shy away from actively discerning God's will. Instead, we're prone to making rash decisions and then rationalizing wildly to justify our actions. Sometimes we do nothing, paralyzed by fear we desperately try to hold on to what we have. That sounds a bit like the actions of the third slave in today's Gospel story. He receives one talent, digs a hole in the ground, and hides his master's money. Surprise! Living fearfully is just one way of hearing this parable. Similarly, hearing a "use it or lose it" memo from God concerning our spiritual gifts and skills, is another way to understand the story.

Jesus' wisdom is often beyond words. But His parables seem to embrace a simple truth that every woman already knows: when it comes to clothes, however optimistic the label might be, one size truly does not fit all! In other words, parables teach and transform us in different ways, at different points in our faith journeys. Today, we will each hear what the Holy Spirit needs us to hear in this parable in order to continue to live and grow in Christ. Our role is to listen actively for the movement of the Holy Spirit, which is part of the intentionality of Christian living.

Within a valid historical context, we might hear this parable tell us that the slave who buries the money is actually the most Christ-like. Sounds pretty radical doesn't it? Here's a little background that might help. The first hearers of this parable were confident in their covenant relationship with God. According to the covenant promise, all receive a share in the land. Anyone who gets rich does so unjustly, in violation of Torah at the expense of others. Leviticus 25 describes a mandated year of Jubilee. Every fifty years, everyone and everything is returned to its original owner. It's like hitting the re-set button on your computer. Everything reverts to the original operating system and settings. In this Biblical system of equality, justice is perfectly served, and no one gains at the expense of another. Equity in financial affairs is also part of the Levitical tradition. Lending money for interest is forbidden in Torah. Hence, some hear the master reprimanding this slave for failing to invest the talent for interest, as a direct violation of the Law. Given Jesus' stance for social justice, and His teaching against allowing money to become an idol, it's a short step to hearing this parable as a call to solidarity with the poor. The third slave is then most Christ-like because he refuses to participate in unjustly acquiring money and impoverishing others. In the story, the master calls this slave worthless, and throws him into the outer darkness. Whether that is what we would call hell or not is also a matter of perspective. Consider how threatening Jesus' surprising teaching is to the Judean leaders, who really did line their pockets and look out for number one. From their perspective, Jesus is not following the rules. It looks like Jesus is out in the dark corner of the ballpark. On the other hand, they're basking in the floodlight of God's affirmation by virtue of their worldly wealth and achievements. When Jesus is crucified it confirms their assertion that they're right, and He is wrong.

From our perspective, I bet few, if any of us have ever identified with the third slave in this parable. Perhaps now some of us do see ourselves taking a stand against the powers of the world that seek to oppress others. Some of us may already feel the sting of rejection, abuse, and suffering, because we choose to live a counter-cultural message of Gospel hope by trusting in the Lord more than our bank accounts. God's kingdom looks like equality for all. Kingdom living is living out divine characteristics, like love, mercy and compassion. God's kingdom is revealed in us when we refuse to accept that success necessarily looks like pots of money. Life in God's kingdom means understanding that living and loving as Christ lives and loves, comes with a price. There is a cost to discipleship, as the third slave discovers.

Now let's flip this around and hear another reading of this parable. In this account, notice the incredible generosity of the master who gives huge amounts of money to each servant. One talent is the equivalent of fifteen to twenty-year's wages. It's like winning the lottery big time! There is a super-abundance of resources placed in our care. The money is also distributed with care, according to our capabilities. That is the graceful act of a loving God. As it says elsewhere in Scripture, we're never given more in life than we can deal with. God doesn't over-burden us, but always cares for us. We each have different capabilities and a variety of gifts that complement each other in the mission of life. In the story, the master then goes away for a long time. Again, this is another gracious act of tender loving care. God creates space for us to grow and live creatively. We are encouraged to take responsibility for our lives and reach out to others. We're invited to respond to God, and develop a genuine relationship with Him.

On His return, the master asks for an accounting. It really doesn't matter how much money the servants have made in their investments. Since it all belongs to God that would be ludicrous. The story isn't about quantitative accomplishments. The point is that the first two servants risk living – period. They take what is entrusted to their care, risk loss or gain, and live in faith. They risk the joy of pleasing God by living boldly. They trust in the Lord without fear, and they don't hide the hope that they have to share. Let's ask ourselves: just how invested are we in serving the Lord with our whole self moment by moment? Are we busy investing in the kind of things that fade away and have no lasting value? Or is our portfolio filled with the kind of fruitful living that God desires? Do the talents in our care look like acts of selfless love, mercy and compassion? Perhaps what we see instead are deeds for personal gain that give us an entirely false sense of security. In boldly participating in the life of their master, the servants are blessed with joy, and bring their master joy. The fidelity of their commitment is mirrored in their whole-hearted imitation of their master. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, it's apparent that if we're not investing in real life, and imitating Christ Jesus, then we're inviting a kind of living death, choosing darkness, instead of light.

Living in these in-between times invites us to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The only response needed is to faithfully commit our lives to God in Christ Jesus. The older I get, the less I know for sure. But I am sure that the Holy Spirit will speak to our hearts today. Maybe He will feel like the tendrils of that surprising houseplant grasping us and consuming us in love. Maybe it will feel like a comforting touch. Perhaps it will prompt us to reach beyond ourselves. In whatever way the Holy Spirit comes to each of us, God desires that we make our lives count by sharing the most important treasure in our care. That is the treasure of the Good News of Jesus Christ, which always brings more love and light into the world, and yields abundant fruit in God's garden.

Amen.