

Sermon on Matthew 25:14-30  
24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 19, 2017  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you...

The lessons we have heard today from the scriptures paint us pictures of both hope and dread in the coming Day of the Lord, speaking words of judgment and salvation. You may not feel that you are in a “happy place” in your pew, hearing these words! The prophet Zephaniah starts out by saying *“Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand...the great day of the Lord is near...a day of wrath, distress and anguish.”* He condemns the people of Judah, and especially the officials, judges, prophets and priests in Jerusalem for their corruption and lack of fear of the righteous Lord. Hmm...not a bad commentary for today’s political situation in America! This is from the opening chapter of Zephaniah’s short book. We do not hear today his closing words in chapter 3, when he calls on Jerusalem to sing and shout, to rejoice and exult, because *“the Lord has taken away the judgments against you....and will remove disaster from you...save the lame and gather the outcast...bring you home and restore your fortunes.”* No, we didn’t read those words today – such happy prophecy must wait until the season of Christmas for us in the Church, and the birth of Jesus! But I gave you a foretaste, just a hint of salvation, lest you languish in despair!

Our gospel lesson from Matthew, that parable about the end of the age which Jesus told to his disciples, doesn’t seem to give us much encouragement today. It’s kind of a story about “the way things are” in this world, regarding money and how we use it or don’t use it, with no happy ending either. I’m suggesting that we don’t look for God or Jesus as a character in this – especially in the rich man who hands out the money! Again, this seems like a story about the way the world works when money is involved, which is nothing like God’s realm that Jesus has been teaching us about in all his other parables. So, what is going on here? And on stewardship Sunday, of all days!

So you know the story. A man (not God, not the king, a man) went on a journey. He entrusted his property with his three slaves (sometimes translated servants – anyway, they worked for him). He gave them portions of his property (i.e. – his money) according to their ability, to turn a profit for him while he was gone. Because it was all about him, and about his money. He entrusted one with five “talents”, one with two “talents”, and the third with one “talent”. Now, a talent was a lot of money. One talent was equal to 80 pounds of silver, which translated into 6,000 denari, and one denarius was equal to pay for one day’s labor. So one talent was equal to 20 years of labor (half of a lifetime)! The first servant

must have been very gifted with money, because he received money worth one hundred years' labor to invest. The second servant received two talents to work with, which was worth forty years' labor – which would be a lifetime. The third servant received one talent to invest, worth twenty years of work. So they each had a big responsibility. But they each worked with different expectations.

When “the boss” came back, he checked into what his entrusted servants had done with the money. The first two were very successful. The one who had five talents doubled his investment – from 100 years of labor to 200 years of labor, We are talking millions of dollars here. The one who had two talents also doubled his money, Both of these servants were praised lavishly by their master, who put them in charge of even more things, and enjoy the same living the master enjoyed. But the third servant, who had half a lifetime's earnings to invest, lost his nerve. He was terrified of the rich man, and was afraid to lose what he had been entrusted with, so he dug a hole in the ground and buried it in the backyard, He earned nothing, and lost nothing. When his boss came back, he was very disappointed in this man's lack of risk or creativity. He hadn't earned him any more money. So he took it away, and gave it to the others. And he threw this third servant outside into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The moral to the story? *“For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”* Isn't that how things really go in this world? Those who already have much, get more? Those who have little, even this is taken away? All manipulated by wealthy men in power, in systems that reward the wealthy and punish the poor? So how is it that the good news of God is different? It's supposed to be, right?

There is another way of looking at this, beyond the way of the world. Jesus could be inviting you and me to think more boldly about the gifts and “talents” that God has given all of us, including the church. You and I may look at what others have been given, whether it is a large mega church with thousands of members, a sparkling new accessible sanctuary complete with a gymnasium, or personal wealth that seems to insulate them from threats to safety or health, and feel that our little corner on this earth isn't worth much. But when we try to protect what little we have, it's like digging a little hole in the ground, covering up our gifts so that others won't see them, or take them away – or just laugh. Jesus may be asking for some boldness here, and some risk taking for good with the gifts God has given us.

The third servant hid his talent in the ground because he was afraid of his master, and of being punished for losing what he was entrusted with. Because this is what happens in this world – with medical bills, credit card debt and pay day lenders – hard work just digs a deeper hole. Sometimes people have this same view of God. They might be afraid of God whom they see as a harsh judge, who will look at our meager, fallible faith with disdain, and throw them out into the

darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is an actual view of God that people do have, unfortunately, because this is what too many churches teach.

Instead, throughout the gospel, Jesus invites you and me to think of God differently, as a merciful, loving parent who forgives, and accepts us for who we are, who gives us everything in life in order for us all to have an abundant life. In a world that doesn't see your gifts, and teaches you and me to "belittle" your gifts as insignificant or yourself as unworthy. Jesus sees you differently. Jesus invites you to see a loving Father, who has given you life, who invites you to risk life without fear of failure, as Jesus did, so that you can share it with others, and invite others to this life. The invitation of the gospel is that we will all be totally surprised at the possibilities!

So, as you came in, the ushers gave you a little card (I hope!). Take it out now, please. Can you name three gifts or talents that God has given you? I don't mean money – or a million dollars! I mean things you have learned or know how to do. Write them down, please.....Then, think about how you can use them for the greater good – sharing, not only for yourself. Please write down one gift or talent that you would like to share through this community of faith, this church. Don't think too small. Think big! What gift do you have that can make a real difference in this church, or in this community – God's work!.....Now, hold onto this, because I will ask you to drop this in the offering basket later in the service.

So, in summary....about these texts today...when you look at your life and the world around you, doesn't it seem sometimes like nothing is going right, and you don't know where to turn? Powerful men in politics demean, harass or abuse young women, often without challenge. Women who speak up are seldom believed. Children and worshipers are shot in schools and churches, and little is done, nothing seems to change. Some days it looks like the whole world is falling apart, screaming to the end. But even in these scripture texts about the last days, terrible as they are, look at the bigger picture, and the hope that Jesus promises in God's mercy and justice shines through in the end. I think of the famous quote attributed to Martin Luther, when asked what he would do if he was told that the world would end tomorrow, Luther said, "*I would plant a tree.*" I remember hearing these words for the first time in East Germany in 1985, when the world was afraid of nuclear war, and the Berlin wall still divided the East from the West. These were the years of Reagan and Gorbachev. Our tour guide named Sabina, looked through the bus window at that wall, and said in her darkest moments that these words gave her hope that one day there will be no more walls, and there will be peace between us. Those words, from a young socialist East German, were spoken to American Lutheran seminarians over 30 years ago.

So I get my hopeful words today not from the gospel parable about second comings, but from the second lesson, in Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica: *"You are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."*

So it seems to me, that our mission as the Church is not only to speak up with warnings about where our bad choices or behaviors can take us, as individuals or as a society. Our greater task is to speak of faith, hope, and God's mercy, God's gift of life, which continues to shine through all the darkness of this world. Do not be afraid! Don't belittle your own gifts, or those of others. Let us encourage one another to hold onto that hope, and "keep the faith" that sustains and energizes us for the work of love for God and our neighbor. For faith, hope, and love lead us to generosity in sharing – both in forgiveness and in good works – which is what "faithful stewardship" is all about, in the end. Thanks be to God. Amen.

We pray for all the women, men, and children who experience sexual harassment or abuse in their workplaces, in government, in school, church, or home, Give them courage to speak up, and when they do, help us to hear and believe them, so that we challenge the offenders and create safe places for work and for worship.  
Lord, in your mercy,

We pray for the people of Zimbabwe, who are going through a bloodless coup by their army, that it will remain peaceful and new leadership will be chosen without bloodshed. We pray for Pastor Rebecca Makayi and the Praise Covenant congregation, who share our church building with us, and worry about their friends and relatives back home, that there will be a peaceful resolution.  
Lord, in your mercy,