

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Zephaniah 1:7-16

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

You want to hear a tough set of words? Here they are: “Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them” (Matthew 25: 19). I suspect that most of y’all have had some pretty tough words put in your ears. “I’m sorry Johnny, I just want to be friends.” “Mrs. Fredrickson, your juvenile son is down in the county jail for public intoxication – I need you to come down to the station.” Tough words, we’ve learned how to deal with them. “It ain’t no use Phil, I have to let you go. It’s time for you to clean out your locker.” “Mrs. Cervantes, I’m afraid that I’ve got some bad news. We have found cancer in both lungs.”

Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. That’s God; He is the Master of this house, your soul, and the wide world. He has gifted you. The Almighty has poured into you such sweet things. You are a remarkably gifted individual. God is the richest of Givers. It is a beautiful thing to be human. You have been invested with priceless gifts. Do you know what you possess? Love, intelligence, compassion; you have the ability to solve problems, to move from place to place, to employ your hands to help others. Do you know what you possess? You have the ability to demonstrate genuine humility, altruism, mercy; you can display perseverance in the face of difficulty, to delay gratification by taking a harder road now, to teach the unlearned, to inspire the despondent, to nurse the sick and to defend the weak. You know right from wrong. You know courage from cowardice. You know the beauty of taking the lowest seat. You know the beauty of turning the other cheek. You know the beauty of denying yourself, picking up your cross and following Christ.

I could go on and on. Humans are magnificent – diverse and wonderful and gifted – every single one of us. Gifted in a most beautiful way; do you know what that implies? It implies that there is a Giver. You are a remarkably gifted people. The Giver has afforded you all that you are, all that you have. Never forget it. **The gifts you have are to be used in a way that pleases the Giver** – that is simple, true, and largely forgotten... to our shame. “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7). The Giver is lavish in His giving. Only He can give life. He uncorks the bottle of life and lets it flow in abundance – and what a gift! A cow doesn’t care how it uses the gift of life. A pig or a donkey feels no obligation to use its life in a way that shows gratitude to the Maker. So, are we above barnyard animals or are we not?

Jesus tells a parable of a man who entrusted His property to His servants and went on a journey. You are the servant. To you has been entrusted the property of Almighty God. What is that property? Life, love, grace, truth, forgiveness, freedom – you are a remarkably gifted people. In the parable, Jesus uses “talents,” money, as the property. In the ancient world, a talent was 20 years wages – a boatload of dough. The point is basic, unmistakable – you have been entrusted with much. Like any investor, God is looking for a return on His investment. What is the kind of return that He is looking for? How have the gifts you have been given been used to help others? Simple: Are you a selfish bore or do you possess the light of Christ and put it on a stand so that it gives light to others in the house?

Love, grace, charity, humility, forgiveness, truth, humor, sacrifice, self-restraint ... those are beautiful. Do you believe that those gifts are mere trifles, or do you believe that they are the dynamic realities that extend from Christ to you? All that is beautiful is anchored to Christ and He gives what is His to you. Memorize this: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). You possess the Lord's gifts. The Giver is looking for a return on His investment. God is well aware of what His love is capable of doing. The first two characters in the parable went at once and set what had been entrusted to them loose in the community. And the return was bodacious. Have you not seen a Christian engage you or others with God's love and been blessed, heartened, strengthened in your soul?

Gwen Anderson was that woman to me. She died a week ago this morning. Gwen was a long-time member of Christ the King. She was a giver – faithful, not afraid of hard work, disinterested in the spotlight, completely supportive of me not as a blower of smoke or to butter up the pastor but because I was Christ's servant in this place and I brought her the Gospel. She gave, Gwen did, with love and sincerity, and a beautiful blend of humility and fierce devotion to Christ and His Word. This parable has individual saints in view, but also the church at large. How would one describe Christ the King Lutheran Church? Do we welcome the stranger, the visitor with authentic interest – as Christ has welcomed us – or do we bury our gift because we are only interested in ourselves, hoarding the goodness of our fellowship? Is this a doors-wide-open infirmary for the spiritually sick or some sort of performance art studio for spiritual grandstanders? Are the Word and Sacraments unleashed in the marketplace of humanity or placed in the ground by ungrateful hearts?

God is going to settle accounts. He is on His way. The third character, the guy who buried his talent, didn't like God much. "You are a hard man. You reap what you do not sow." Sounds to me like this guy didn't think of himself as gifted, that the Giver didn't really give him what he had. It may be hard to hear, but sometimes you behave like you don't really like God all that much. He says that you are to put others above yourself and you say, "Nah, gonna bury that one. That God is a hard man, hasn't given me much. Why the heck should I treat that doofus over there with regard? Let someone else do it." The third fella buried his talent in the backyard and sniped at the Giver: "Here's your talent back. I don't really like your business practices, so, have a nice day." The words that are put in that guy's ears are gentle compared to the hell that will envelop him. "You wicked and slothful servant! Take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents." That's the end of the story for the third guy. You are not at the end. Repent. Contentment – you've buried it and let greed run your heart. Repent. Obedient to God's call to be sober – you've buried it and filled yourself with the wrong spirit. Repent. Forgiveness – you've been hurt and buried forgiveness and thrown yourself into vengeance. Repent. God is going to settle accounts. All of us show too much likeness to the third character. Repent. "Bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8).

There is great irony in this parable, Gospel irony; it is unwritten but it is in every word. Christ was the treasure that God buried. After He was crucified, God buried His Son in the heart of the earth – for you to be rich. From eternity, the Father invested His love in His Son. Two thousand years ago, God sent His Son into our flesh and Jesus' life was parlayed among us. God so loved the world, that He gave His Son into the marketplace of humanity – bringing life and light and

hope and goodness and heaven. Hard words were put in Jesus' ears: "Crucify, crucify him" (Luke 23:21). Jesus was despised by the world, hung on a cross, and laid in the tomb. Buried! Treasure untold was dead and buried. And He rose again. For you – to make you rich with all the beauty of His life, the wonder of His love, His forgiveness, His charity, His grace – you have it all. Faith loves Him very much, cherishes Him, sacrifices for Him, lives for Him, reflecting His giving. On Easter, when Jesus rose from the dead, God rattled every tomb there will ever be. The return of the Father's investment is astounding – a harvest of life. Christ's life is presently in the marketplace of the world and showing great return. That life is in you. Christ is in you. We are a remarkably gifted people.