

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
November 19, 2023  
Lectionary 33 (A)  
Text: Matthew 25:14-30

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When I was 3 or 4, my Aunt Barbara came to live with me and my parents for a few months while she was receiving medical treatment that she couldn't receive at home in Kansas. I absolutely loved my Aunt Barbara. She was fun and lively, and had a wonderful imagination. She taught me the alphabet and how to begin to read. We'd play all sorts of games together. She was such a warm and caring person... unless she was afraid. As a child, I didn't understand what was going on. But looking back now, I can remember a couple of times when being afraid brought out a kind of harshness and rigidity in her. For me, then, it was kind of scary, and now I think mostly that it's really sad.

I think our Gospel writer, St. Matthew, was probably a little bit like my Aunt Barbara. I love the Gospel of Matthew, especially for the Sermon on the Mount. I love Matthew's lively and challenging way of picturing how Jesus calls us to follow him in his way of love. It's beautiful how Matthew describes Jesus' way as forgiveness and compassion, as generous and inclusive community, as humility and human relationships made right because of God's all-encompassing love. But, when Matthew is afraid, he becomes harsh and rigid. Instead of "blessed are the merciful and blessed are the peacemakers," it's "throw them into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." It's not pretty.

It seems that Matthew was afraid of certain religious adversaries. He saw them as a threat to his Christian community. So, with stories like the parable in our gospel reading for today, he tried to draw a hard line that made it absolutely clear what he thought were the stakes of being inside or outside of the community of Jesus' followers. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that when Matthew's fear starts to infect the church, it's not pretty. Fear erases creativity and openness of heart, and instead creates defensiveness and rigidity and judgmentalism. I don't think that's a place any of us really want to go.

I think it's helpful to see how Matthew's fear has shaped the way he tells this story. Jesus was known for telling parables that challenge what we think we know, not allegories that offer a simple picture of "how things really are." But Matthew seems to present this story as an allegory, and the interpretation would appear to be fairly straightforward. The master who is going away is Jesus. The servants who have been entrusted with the master's property are... us. And the property? It's whatever we have been entrusted with—our abilities, our time, our wealth. And if we read the parable as an allegory, the master's anger at the third servant is genuinely disturbing. It suggests that God is finally unforgiving, and God's judgment is really harsh. And I've known a number of people who have thought of God that way—and it created serious problems for their faith and their relationship with God.

I wonder if we can imagine what Jesus might have intended by telling a story like this as a parable. A lot of Jesus' stories use over-the-top imagery to provoke reflection on how we live

and how we respond to God's incredible mercy and lavish generosity. There's the story about the person who finds an incredibly valuable treasure hidden in a field—what will they do? They sell everything they own to buy that field. Or there's the one about the person who was forgiven an unimaginably huge debt—what will they do? When they meet someone who owes them a small debt, they act vindictive and mean, and things end up not going well for them. Our story this morning is sort of like those stories. In Jesus' time, a talent was an unbelievably huge amount of money. It's as if we would say that the master gave his servants a bazillion dollars. So what will they do with it? And what will you do with what you've been given?

One of the things I love about Jesus' stories is how they tend to be open-ended, so that we can interpret them in all sorts of different ways, depending on what's stirring in our lives at the moment.

For example, maybe this past week you woke up one morning when the sun was shining, and you thought: what an amazing thing it is to be alive. What an incredible gift God has given me. So then, what will you do with this gift of life God has entrusted to you. We all know we can't hold onto it forever. What will you do with it while you have it? What will you do with it today? Will you invest it in ways that further things that matter to God? Will you use it in ways that look like Jesus' way of love?

Or maybe you took a walk one afternoon this week and you noticed the colors of the leaves, the vibrant reds and yellows and oranges. Maybe you thought: what a beautiful creation God has made. What will you do then to care for this world. Do you see ways that humanity is careless in how it treats this amazing world? What can you do differently? What can you do to care for God's world, so it can be a blessing for generations to come?

Or maybe you came to church this morning and noticed all of the beautiful, faithful people that make up this community. Maybe you thought: what a treasure God has entrusted to me. This community is where I feel belonging. This is where I feel cared about. This community is where I am reminded how God loves me, that I belong to God forever. What will you do then to build up and care for this community?

Or maybe in this congregation you've heard the Gospel proclaimed, and you've thought: this is exactly what humanity needs most—to know that every person is loved, to be invited into a life of forgiveness and humility and compassion. That way of living could not only give individuals a sense of peace and purpose in life, but could pull us collectively back from the abyss of hate and contempt, of greed and overconsumption. What will you do with that good news?

When we hear the parable this way, it's wonderful, not only for provoking a sense of gratitude, but also nurturing a sense of purpose in our lives. What will you do with all the amazing gifts and abilities and resources that God has entrusted to you?

Although there's still the end of the story, with the third servant being held accountable by the master. Even if we ignore Matthew's fear-mongering at the end (Throw him into the outer

darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth), there's still something sad and unsettling about this part of the parable. But I think it's probably important for us to sit with that part of the story too. The third servant took the path of least resistance. His only concern seemed to be what was easiest for him. There was nothing great for him to invest his life in, nothing to warrant effort or passion. To me, that does sound like a very sad sort of life—not just at the end, when the servant has to give an accounting to the master for what he's done, but every step before then. It's like his life was just wasted. God forbid that any of us would just shuffle through life like that, never looking beyond our own wants and desires, and never being drawn into the wonder and passion of Jesus' way of love.

So, beloved children of God, I wonder what gifts God has entrusted to you. And I wonder how you will use them, invest them and spend them, with passion and generosity and purpose—with a sense that you have received a great gift and a high calling in life. And I wonder also whether you might already be hearing the master's affirmation: Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master. Thanks be to God. Amen.