

Buried Talents

In the name of him who is coming to judge the earth, dear friends in Christ: Today's Gospel lesson is one of those that makes me feel uncomfortable at the end when I announce: "This is the Gospel of the Lord." That's because it ends on a note that is anything but Gospel, which means "Good News". "Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" is not a Gospel statement as we Lutherans understand it; it's Law with a capital L – and pretty frightful Law at that. It's only because this reading comes from one of the four books of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – the books we call the Gospels – that we can say "This is the Gospel of the Lord."

The text should be familiar to us, though. It's one of Jesus' better known parables; but it probably doesn't qualify as anyone's favorite. No, most of us prefer parables with happy endings, like the one about the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Like I said, this one ends on a sour note, with a strong word of condemnation – which means it's meant as a warning to us. And that's all the more reason that we should sit up and take notice at its teaching, even if and perhaps especially because it has such a frightful conclusion.

But first a word about its placement in Matthew's Gospel and the ministry of our Lord. This parable appears in a larger section of Jesus' teaching about the end times. It's part of a discussion he had with his disciples on the Mount of Olives on Tuesday of Holy Week, just a couple days before his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The disciples had asked Jesus about how things would be at the end of this age and how they should prepare for it, and Jesus is responding to them with a series of parables, each one stressing a different aspect of Christian life and discipleship. A few weeks back, we had the Parable of the Wedding Feast. Its focus is on the king's gracious invitation to come to the wedding of his Son, and how so many of those honored in this way by the king couldn't be bothered to show up. So instead the king had his servants drag in anyone they could find on the street. In one sense, we saw that it was about God's own people, Israel, and how, for the most part, they rejected the fullness of the Gospel when the Lord Jesus appeared, and how the invitation then went out to the Gentiles. Applying it to ourselves and our times, we saw that it has to do with the ministry of the Church, and how so many of us don't appreciate that each week Jesus, God's Son, comes here among us to give us a foretaste of the feast to come in his Word and Sacraments. Like the Israelites of old, too often we think we've got better things to do – and so, like them, we run the risk of being excluded, while the king searches out more receptive and appreciative guests to invite to his feast.

Then, last week, we heard the Parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were wise, and five were foolish. They'd all been invited to the wedding feast. And they all responded positively to the invitation. But not knowing how long they would have to wait for the Bridegroom to appear, the wise brought extra oil for their lamps. The others did not. As the Groom was much delayed, all of them fell asleep. When at midnight the Bridegroom finally appeared, only the five wise virgins were able to light their lamps and enter with him into the wedding banquet. The others weren't prepared, and so they were locked out. We saw that this parable has to do with remaining faithful until death and doing what is necessary to feed the fire of holy faith and keep it alive while we remain in the day of grace. The foolish virgins represent those who begin the life of faith, but then over time and through neglect of the means of grace, they allow the flame of their faith to die. May Christ our Lord and Savior keep us from such folly.

Today's parable about the talents follows immediately afterward. Its emphasis is on how we are to be engaged as we await the coming of the Lord. Perhaps even more it highlights what our attitude should be regarding our ongoing work for the kingdom in the present time. The parable is simple enough. A wealthy land owner is going away on a journey. Before he departs, he calls together his servants in order to entrust to each of them a certain portion of his wealth with the expectation that they will employ what they've been given to increase their master's holdings. He doesn't distribute to all of them the same amount. Instead he assigns different portions according to his estimation of their relative abilities. Then the master goes away. Some of his servants go at once and begin to put their master's money to work in various business ventures. Through wise use of the resources entrusted to their care, they come out ahead. When the master returns, they are able to give him back both his investment and the increase they were able to earn with it. For their diligent work and faithfulness, they are amply rewarded. "You proved faithful with little, now I will put you over much. Enter into the joy of your Master."

But then another fellow is brought forward who refused to use his master's money in any productive way. He took what he'd been given to invest and buried it in the ground. He seemed to think that his master would be satisfied simply to have his initial investment returned to him. He found out otherwise. The master tells him, "That isn't why I gave it to you. At bare minimum you could have deposited my money in a bank where it would draw a bit of interest. But you couldn't even be bothered to do that." He orders this wicked and lazy servant to be relieved of his money and cast into the outer darkness where there is agony and misery.

That's the story. And now unpacking it, it's pretty clear what Jesus means. He is the master who is going away on a journey. That is, he's going to be removing his visible presence from his disciples. That's what happened when he departed into heaven at the Ascension, forty days after his resurrection from the dead. Then the disciples were told that Jesus would return visibly on the Last Day, at some unknown date in the future. Of course, we understand that Jesus is not truly gone. He promised to be with his church to the very end of the age. It's just that for the time being we do not see him. Rather, in this age, he manifests his presence in his church through the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

The servants entrusted with portions of the master's wealth represent us, the members of his church who have been called by the Gospel and enlightened with the Spirit's gifts to believe and trust in it. And in each one of us believers the Lord has made an investment. In the parable these are described as talents of silver. To give you an idea, a single talent was what an average working man would expect to be paid for two years' worth of work, gross income. It's a sizable sum. Now, it's long been understood that these talents are to be taken metaphorically. The Lord doesn't invest actual money with us (although, to be accurate, the wealth God gives us should be included among the talents he entrusts to our care). The point is that we want to take a much broader approach here. The talents he assigns can be just about anything: all the gifts, advantages, natural abilities, characteristics, personality traits, education, family connections, circumstances, employment, and life experiences – anything that might be employed in some positive sense to further the cause of the kingdom of God and extend its reach. That's just the baseline. To these we want to add the supernatural gifts of the Spirit that are assigned to some according to the Lord's good pleasure and will: gifts of great faith, spiritual understanding, administration, leadership, service, and aptitude for teaching to name but a few. And we certainly don't want to leave out the one gift we've all been entrusted with: the Gospel itself, the message of Jesus Christ crucified for sinners that is the power of God unto life and salvation. We may have been entrusted with more or less of these other gifts according to God's design; but all of us possess the Gospel, which is the most valuable treasure of all.

The question is: what are you doing with the investment Jesus has made in you? He has a right to expect an increase. That's why he's given you the talents, the abilities, the blessings, and gifts you have. And for a positive example, in the parable he presents us with the first two servants. And rather than focus on their success, the main thing to pay attention to is their attitude. We read that when the first guy got his five talents *immediately* he went to work. We detect in him a joyful industry. He loves his master and wants to do him good. He's grateful for the honor of being entrusted with a portion of his master's wealth, and he's delighted to be able to present his master with the fruit of his effort. It's not so "look at me and what I've done", but rather "thank you for your trust in me; see what your investment earned for you".

Now, it's true that in the parable both of the productive servants doubled their master's investment in them. I think this speaks to power of God's Word to work increase for his kingdom whenever and by whomever it's applied. But understanding the Master's character, we're left to believe that any increase however small would have been appreciated and gratefully rewarded. I'm inclined to think that even a loss would have been acceptable if the servant had been diligent and resourceful. When making investments, there are no guaranteed winners. And sometimes what appear to be very good investments go south due to unseen circumstances.

No, the real problem with the last guy, the servant who buried his master's talent, wasn't that he didn't earn an increase. It was his negative attitude about serving. He claims to have been afraid. His master, he says, he knows to be a hard man, reaping where he didn't sow, and gathering where he didn't scatter seed. But it's patently obvious that this servant was not afraid of his master. Fear would have compelled him to do something even against his will. The master reveals the servant's true motives when he calls him wicked and slothful. In other words, "You're evil and don't want to serve me; and you're lazy – concerned only for yourself. You despised me and the investment I made in you, and you wasted your opportunities to serve." The servant is rightly cast out and condemned.

And that should make us all uncomfortable because the fact of the matter is that the Lord has made great investments in each one of us. To be sure, in about a week and a half we'll pause to count our blessings on Thanksgiving Day. It's right that we should. As a nation, there's no other people on the planet more blessed than we are. And from a spiritual point of view, there is no one else who has the treasure of the Gospel in a purer or richer form than do we in this church. We really have been blessed by God beyond measure. Certainly, he means us to enjoy his blessing to us, as well as time, treasures, and talents he's entrusted to our care. But it also means that he has a right to expect a return on his investment.

There's work for the kingdom of God that needs doing. It's that simple. And some of it isn't being done because those of us with the talents and time aren't using them. We've hidden them. We've buried them. And it's not because we're afraid. It's because we don't fear and love the Lord. We are wicked, selfish, and lazy. The truth is that the Lord will be compelled one day to reap where he didn't sow and gather where he didn't scatter seed. That is to say, there are people who will stand in the judgment and be condemned because they do not believe in Jesus. And it won't be because they rejected him. It will be because they never heard of him. Why? It will be because the people he charged with the task of reaching them neglected their duty. It will be because opportunities the Lord made available weren't exploited. It will be because the doors the Lord opened weren't entered. It will be because his people buried and hid the talents he entrusted to them.

This ought to get each one of us to ask: What talents have I buried? What gifts of God am I neglecting to develop and employ? What work for God's kingdom could I be doing; but I'd really rather not bother with? How am I wasting the investments the Lord Jesus has made in me?

There's plenty of guilt to go around here. And the solution is not to be driven by fear to try harder. No. The solution is to repent of the many ways we've been burying and hiding the Lord's investments in us, and then to hear again the Good News that for Jesus' sake our sins are forgiven. Then, filled with thanksgiving, godly joy, and the power of the Spirit, we can go forth like those first two servants who loved their master, delighted in serving him, and were eager to use his investment in them to increase his holdings. That's the way to unbury and employ our buried talents. May we therefore do so, that we too may receive the commendation of our Lord: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!