

November 19, 2023

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

Well done, good and faithful servant

Jesus has told us he is going away. He is leaving and going to the Father, and then one day he will return. And when he does, he wants to come back to find us doing what he asked, following his commandments, being faithful. Last week, he told us he wants us to be like bridesmaids, prepared to wait, with enough oil to keep our lamps lit. Today, Jesus tells us that he wants us to care for his estate. His gifts, his talents. He is entrusting them to us. He wants us to put them to good use while he is away.

Jesus is telling his disciples what expects of them. And today's parable is a set of instructions and a warning. We meet a master going on a journey, who entrusts all of his property to his slaves. To one slave he gives 5 talents worth of his estate, to another slave 2, to a third, one.

What the master entrusts to his slaves with is not a small paltry thing, it is huge. One talent was the largest measure by weight of gold or silver and it was worth 20 years of wages for the average worker. Five talents would have been five times that, 100 years of labor or more. It's a lot.

That's an enormous amount for the slaves to be entrusted with. And it's a big responsibility to be in charge of it.

Jesus will not be leaving his disciples with nothing. That's the first point of our parable. He is leaving them with all the resources they could need to do something good. And those resources aren't just money. They are something better, something bigger. They are grace and love and mercy and hope. It's the power of the Holy Spirit, that energizes us and holds us together and helps us imagine a better world. And that gift is worth its weight in gold.

In the parable, the master leaves his slaves with all that he has. He puts his wonderful resources in their hands. Those slaves are all set. And sometimes, don't we wish we had resources like that too? Particularly as a small church in a small town. We don't have what big churches have. We have limited budgets and limited time and a limited number of people. We can't do everything that everyone might want us to do. And it might feel like we don't have much. Like Jesus went off and left us with nothing. But that's not true. What Jesus has given us is more than

enough to be his church. He has given us everything we need to love and to serve and to reveal the hidden kingdom of God among us.

Jesus has given us everything and he wants us to do something with it.

Last weekend, I went to a church gathering of the three Presbyteries or regions of Kentucky. Our speaker, Mark Elsdon, challenged us to think about what we DO have, instead of what we DON'T have. We aren't broke, he said. We aren't empty-handed. He had us make a list of all our assets: our land, our buildings; our technology, our location, all the way down to our stoves, our kickballs, our office supplies, our people and their unique talents. He wanted us to see that God has given us a lot. But maybe we could be more creative with it. Maybe we could use what we have in new ways to make a greater impact in our community and multiply God's grace.

I had a moment of pride there. I'll admit to that sin. I thought, WE are already pretty creative with our blessings. We have a community garden. We host Girl Scouts and Scottish dancing and yoga in our fellowship hall. We open our building to AA and community meetings and family

parties. We multiply connection and hope and love in our community for a return. Way to go, us!

But then, our speaker had us think about money and real investments too. He challenged us to think about how we could put together the spiritual and financial. And how our investments can have a big impact on the world. Rev. Elsdon has first-hand experience with risk. When he came to the University of Wisconsin in Madison Presbyterian student ministry, there were no students involved. What they did have was a huge building in need of repairs. And a huge parking lot right next door. And it was located right in the middle of campus. Mark looked at these things and he got creative. What if they could use their prime location? And address a need for student housing and community-building? So, they took the parking lot and turned it into a seven-story student housing complex. And the residents are part of intentional communities or service groups or mission groups. And one group is for students in addiction recovery. And they hired real property managers and they treated it like a business AND a ministry. And every year, 1000 students

are impacted by what this group does. They took the blessing that they had and multiplied it.

God has us with blessings. God has entrusted us with resources to continue Jesus' work. And so we need to do something with it. That's Jesus' second point. We have been entrusted with the master's property. And the master expects us to use it, to invest it, to take a risk and get a return. But remember, that investment isn't all about money or property. It's about life and hope and resurrection. It's about imagining the kingdom of God on earth. What if we didn't just invest in the stock market but in the lives of our neighbors, and our kids, and our elderly? What if we didn't just make the stock portfolios of Amazon or Apple or Microsoft more profitable? What if we invested locally? Creatively? Beneficially? For our neighbors.

I am not an expert on business or business language in church. I think more about charity than about profits. But what if it's all part of the profit of the Spirit? The profits in health and joy and integrity and the common good? And it's not just about numbers. It's about connections and relationships. And not something that just the minister does, or the

talented organist, or the couple of volunteers who always show up. It's the work of each of us, all of us. Everyone has been given a part of this. Everyone has been entrusted with Jesus' estate and he wants to see results when he returns. He wants to be able to say to each of us, to all of us: Well done, good and faithful servant.

By the end of the parable, I think it's clear what Jesus is saying. "I have given you my own great riches and the divine assets of the kingdom.

Now, go and do something with them. Put them out there. Invest them.

Share them. Put them to work. Whatever you do, don't hide them or

bury them to keep them safe 'til I return." Jesus says the slave who does

that is wicked and lazy. He gets cast out into the outer darkness where

there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Maybe he didn't understand.

Maybe he was too afraid. Maybe he didn't want the responsibility.

Whatever it is, it's a warning to us that we can't sit around and do

nothing until Jesus comes back.

The judgment part of this parable isn't my favorite part. If Jesus just

expects us to turn a profit for him, then that sounds pretty cold and

mercenary. It makes the kingdom of God seem like a cruel business. And

Jesus wants to motivate us by fear. And it's true. When we are afraid, we do something. When our cough scares us, we go to the doctor. When we fear losing our marriage, we go to counseling. When we see the drugs will kill us, we check into rehab. Fear is what pushes us to do something. When it comes to our salvation and judgment. And what will happen when we stand before God in the end. And how we might disappoint God or let God down. If you don't want that, says Jesus, listen to me. Do what I'm telling you to do when I am gone.

But fear can only do so much. It can only make us so faithful and then no more. It's fear that makes the third slave hide his talent. He is so afraid of his master that he won't take any risks. And when the master returns, the slave confesses that he was afraid to do anything. He says: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, that you reaped where you did not sow and gathered where you did not plant." He believed the master was cruel and unjust and just plain mean, so he was afraid to do anything.

If we are afraid of God, then we will be afraid to try. We will be afraid to be faithful. God's gifts won't feel like gifts. They will feel like a burden,

a prison sentence. Like one more disappointment waiting to happen. The apostle Paul reminds us that that's not the good news that Jesus proclaimed to us. He said we are not destined for wrath, but for salvation. God's way is not anger. God's way is love. And God's desire for us is life, not death. God's will is for creation, not destruction. So, encourage one another with these words, Paul says. And build one another up.

Jesus wants us to take care of his estate when he is gone. And build up the abundance of mercy it has. To love one another as Jesus has loved us and increase it. To multiply what is right and good no matter what.

That's the third lesson for today. We have to do what Jesus asks, even if it costs us everything.

In the 1930s, Oscar Schindler was a businessman in Germany. He was a rich businessman interested in making money. He had a factory that produced enamel cookware for the Nazi army. Initially he hired Jews because they were the cheapest laborers. But then they began deporting Jews, and Schindler saw what the Nazis were doing, that they were murdering and killing Jewish people systematically. And Schindler knew

it was wrong. He began looking out for his Jewish workers. He claimed exemptions for them and forged papers for them. He bribed Nazi officials with fancy, black-market luxuries to protect them. When the Nazis cleared the ghetto where his workers lived, he had them come live at his factory, and he supplied them with houses and medical care and bought them extra rations. Then the Nazis forced Schindler to move to a new factory to make artillery shells. He insisted on taking all of his Jewish workers with him. But he made sure his factory produced next to nothing. Instead, he bought shells from other companies and resold them as his own for a loss. He spent all his money trying to keep his workers and those too weak to work from the death camps. By the end of WW 2, Schindler was broke. All of his future businesses would fail. And when he died in 1974, he had nothing. But the descendants of Schindler's workers had his body brought to Jerusalem and buried there. On his grave is a Hebrew inscription that says, Righteous among the Gentiles. In German it says: "a lifesaver of 1,200 persecuted Jews."

We have been blessed with resources. With gifts from God, so that we can do the business of God. So that we can invest in the world around

us, and multiply love and mercy and life. We can teach others to live in faith, not in fear. Because we know Jesus will return and when he does, we want him to be proud. We want him to say, Well done, Good and Faithful Servants.