

A Talent for Complacency
Sunday Pentecost 24, Year A
Zephaniah 1: 7 – 16; 1 Thessalonians 5: 1 – 11; Matthew 25: 14 – 30
November 15, 2020

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have two words for you today that will help us, I think, with today's parable; talent and complacency. Let's start with the first word: talent.

We all know what a talent is in common English usage. A talent is something you are naturally good at doing; singing, painting, dancing, speaking, writing... whatever. We all, to varying degrees, have God given talents.

But, that is not the same talents as is in our reading today. The talents that Jesus speaks of in this parable, aren't things we are good at, instead, it is a unit of weight, especially, in regard to money. A talent was roughly equal to twenty years worth of wages. A considerable amount of money.

So, notice what is happening in this parable. A man goes on a journey and he gives large sums of money to three men. To one he gives 5 talents, or 100 years worth of wages. Another he gives the equivalent of 40 years worth of wages. And to another, 20 years worth.

Then the man, goes on his journey. Now it is somewhat obvious that the man was expecting these men to invest the money somehow; to use it wisely and to provide some kind of return. We know this because when the man returns he wants to 'settle' accounts. He is not coming to gather back up his money. He is expecting that the money was used for something, hopefully a worthwhile investment that would increase his wealth.

And, when the first two men show that they had doubled what was given to them, the man was pleased with them.

But, to the one who did nothing with it, but simply gave back to the man the same talent that was given to him, the man was not pleased.

In fact, he says, “*You wicked and slothful servant! ... cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (v. 30).

Seems rather harsh, hard, and, well, just plain mean, doesn't it? Yes, it does.

But, that is part of the point with parables. They not only teach a particular lesson, but they also should jar you and make you think. Almost like a riddle. The punch line is usually not what you would expect.

Which brings us to our second word: complacency. When reading Scripture, as you know, context matters. And, reading a parable out of context does damage to the meaning of the parable. So, we have to look at the passages around the parable to pick up clues to the ‘riddle’... so to speak.

This parable follows directly after our Gospel reading from last week. So, we are familiar with that parable; the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Five of the virgins were prepared to see the coming of the Bridegroom, while five were not. The first five go into the wedding feast, the other five do not. They were complacent. They were not prepared.

Our Old Testament reading today, also, fits into this idea of complacency. Zephaniah is trying to move the people from complacency to faith, “*At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, ‘The Lord will not do good, nor will he do ill’*” (Zeph. 1:12).

The people of Israel were not too enthused with the things of God. It had become too, blah.

And, now, I'm going to say something, somewhat tongue in cheek, but also has a lot of truth to it. But, before you get up and leave (and I do have a moving truck reserved, just in case), let me make my point. Agreed?

Okay...here it goes... life long Lutherans make the worst Lutherans. (duck)

Let me explain... those who have been Lutheran all their life don't always realize how good they have it. They have always heard of the love, mercy, and grace of God. They have been taught the good and pure doctrine of Scripture. They know they are sinners, but they also know that Christ died for them. Yet, unfortunately, this can cause a type of complacency.

Even though, in many ways, I envy my 'cradle' Lutherans. They have had it good. And, my children are, and will be, by the grace of God, life long Lutherans.

I became Lutheran at the age of 10. I was baptized and, later, catechized in the Lutheran church.

But, there was a time, in my teenage and early twenties, where I was a homeless Christian. My home church had gone through a terrible time of infighting and division. Many people left. My family were some of the last to go.

Much like Tahlequah, there were no other Lutheran churches nearby. We tried the Methodist church... didn't work. We tried the Baptist church... nope, that wasn't right either. Looking back, I was a lot like Godilocks trying out all the porridge. Nothing was right. Even tried nondenominational, Word of Faith, Assembly of God... none of them had what the Lutheran church offered.

Just in case you were wondering, I did eventually find my way back into the Lutheran church and even became a pastor... didn't want to leave you with a 'Clif'-hanger. ☺

And, now, the longer I am Lutheran the more I fall in love with our theology, our liturgy, and everything that makes us who we are.

I tell you this, because I love it when there are those who come here from other denominational backgrounds, or no Christian background at all, and they finally hear the Gospel.

They hear of God's love for them. They begin to understand the beauty in the Sacraments. They grow closer to God because they realize He doesn't base His love on their works or level of commitment. And, they become little Gospel go getters. They are like that Sunday School song, "hide it under a bushel, NO. I'm gonna let it shine." They have plenty of oil in their lamps...

But, this is what we have in the parable today. The first two men are given a lot. Nothing in the parable says they deserved it. And, if God is the man who gives, we know He gives generously. He doesn't give money, though. That's not really what the parable is about. Instead, what does God give to you? He gives to you grace, mercy, peace, joy,... forgiveness.

And, those who come into the faith with a lot to be forgiven, those who have a sordid past...those who we would not normally hang out with. But, once they discover the Gospel, the amount of gratitude that spews out of their mouth... wow!

Remember, the woman at the well, who Jesus talks to. She was a Samaritan. She was an outcast, according to the Jews. Not only that, but she had had five husbands, and was currently living with a guy that was not her husband. But, when Jesus delivers the Gospel, the flame is lit, she isn't going to hide it, instead, what does she do? She goes back to town and says, "*Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?*" (John 4:29)?

This is the first two men in the parable. They had been given much, and they took it, invested it and doubled their investment. The third man, took what was given to him, the grace, mercy, peace and forgiveness, and he hid it. He was complacent. He hid it. His gratitude was nowhere near the level of the other two. Instead, when the man comes back to collect, he tells him, "*Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where*

you scattered no seed,²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground” (vs. 24b-25).

A hard man, reaping where he did not sow, gathering where he scattered no seed. Is this true of our God? Yes... yes, it is. He reaps and gathers the sins of His people. And, He gives them grace, mercy, peace and forgiveness without asking. He just does it. Your sins... gone. His forgiveness ... given. You didn't ask for it? SO! He doesn't need your permission!

How many talents of forgiveness have you received? How complacent are you?

Yes, you can be just like this third servant. Hide it. And, when He comes again to collect, as we know He will on the Last Day, you can give it back to Him and tell Him how much you didn't really want it to begin with. *““You wicked and slothful servant! ... cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Or, you can take what has been given to you, rejoice in it, and invest it in those around you. And, when the Master comes, He will say, *“Well done, good and faithful Lutheran...err...servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.”*

Now may the peace that passes all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.