

November 19, 2017  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Matthew 25:14-30

## Fear or Faith?

There is a lot of tension in today's parable from the gospel of Matthew. Just as there has been over the past few weeks in all of our readings from the gospel. It's because we are nearing the end. And Matthew is talking about the end of all things. And every parable is full of terrible consequences and outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth. The atmosphere is growing more anxious by the minute. And on one level this story is about Jesus and his end. And how he will soon face suffering and betrayal and death. But on another level, it's about the early church, the church Matthew is writing to, and their end and how they will also face suffering, betrayal, and even death as they wait for Jesus' return. There is a lot of fear and anxiety in this gospel. It seems custom made for our time of fear and anxiety. And our worry about how things will end. But Jesus reminds us that we can't do nothing. God has given us great things and when we use them, we will do great things for God.

But I know, it's easier said than done, since we live in such fearful and anxious times. With the threat of nuclear war. And unstable dictators. And a divisive political atmosphere. And everyone feeling on edge. According to the Pew Research Center, trust is at an all time low in our country.<sup>1</sup> We don't trust our government. We don't trust our leaders. We don't trust our neighbors. And we don't trust the people who try to sell us things. And isn't everyone trying to sell us things? And then combine that with the fact that we don't stay in one place for long. We can't stay to invest in a community and that time that builds trust, it doesn't happen. We don't trust each other like we used to. We are suspicious and anxious and afraid.

In Jesus' day and in the early church, I imagine those same feelings were there. In their world, there was corruption. And rampant abuse of power. And leaders who did unethical and immoral things. And the neighbors who were probably up to no good. And foreigners who looked sketchy. And the Romans, who could decide one day that they didn't like you.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-remains-near-historic-lows-as-partisan-attitudes-shift/>

And in a matter of moments, you could be arrested and convicted and sentenced to death. Just like that. Just like Jesus. Just like other early Christians. The world was not a trustworthy place. But here's the remarkable thing Jesus tells his disciples today. In this world of suspicion he tells us a parable about trust. About a God who trusts us with a great treasure. Who trusts us to accomplish divine things. Who entrusts us with a mission to be the church.

Jesus tells his fearful and anxious disciples about a man going on a journey. The man gives all that he has to his slaves. He gives it, not to his family or to his business partners or to his buddies from the golf course. He gives all that is his own to his slaves. Now Jesus is not endorsing slavery here. Please don't hear him saying that. What he is describing is the socio-economic reality of life in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. A stratified class system of people above and people below. And in this culture, in this way of thinking for Jesus, God, naturally is the one above and we are the ones below. We are the servants who serve him, aren't we?

BUT this master is unlike any other master. This master leaves his wealth in the care of his slaves. All that is his, he ENTRUSTS to those who serve him. That's how this God works. Not like the Roman gods or the Greek gods that kept the divine good stuff for themselves. Our God gives that good stuff to us. And trusts us with it. God says, here, take care of this for me. This wonderful creation that I made from nothing. And all the amazing life in it. All the life around you and within you. God says, here, this is mine, but I'm giving it to you. Please, look after it for me. God gives us charge of what is God's own. God trusts us with it. This parable is as much about our trusting God as it is about anything else. Jesus says, the Kingdom is like a man going on a journey who entrusts everything to his servants. This Lord has faith in his servants. This one believes they will be good stewards. That's the first lesson of this parable. That God has put God's trust in us. Second, it's about the slaves. It's about what we do with what has been given to us. And each of us have been given something different. The master entrusted five talents to one slave and to another two and to another one, each according to his ability. God entrusts each person differently. Not

everyone gets the same thing. And not everyone has the same amount. And in this world of anxiety and fear, we notice that. Of course, we notice that about this parable. We always notice when others have more and we have less. And things aren't quite fair. And that makes us anxious and afraid too. "God, how come others have more? And why does she have better stuff and why does he have more than me? And how come my church doesn't have what other churches have? It's just not fair." Notice the servants in our parable don't do that. They don't complain. They aren't resentful about what they have. Because all these things belong to the master. The slaves know that everything is a gift for which each is responsible. So it doesn't matter how much you have, it matters how you use it.

What matters is what we do with what we've got. That's the only thing that matters to Jesus. The slaves have different amounts but they are to use them with the same purpose. Because they are on the same mission. They are to be fruitful. Jesus' mission is to give the world life. Unless grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single seed. But if it dies, it produces a multitude of seeds. That's the work of the kingdom.

To use what we've been given to spread the self-giving love of God that dies to itself so that life and faith and trust can grow and expand. That's what the first slave does, the one with five talents. He takes what he has been given, and he works with it. That's what the Greek word means. Ergazo, like the word ergonomic. He ergazo's and he gains more. It's the same with the slave with two talents. He gets to work. He risks. He trades. He takes what he has and invests it in the world. He works with what he's got. And he gets a return. Like the farmer who risks planting the seeds and reaps a harvest. The first two slaves take what they have and they make the best of it.

Our little church isn't as big as some. We don't have a huge congregation. We don't have a staff or multiple secretaries. We don't have tons of volunteers and tons of volunteer organizers. We don't have every kind of ministry that would satisfy every kind of person. But what we do have, we are making the very best of. We have been entrusted with some special things. We have a big backyard. So we have turned it into a Community Garden. We have a fellowship hall. So we use it for yoga and girl scouts and wedding showers and potlucks and we loan the

space regularly to St Matthew AME. We have an endowment, given to us by the Headen family. Entrusted to us. And we are using it to fund a backpack ministry and a music program and a youth group you wouldn't believe. And I see all those things making a return, don't you? Don't you just feel it all bearing fruit for God? Especially with the youth. The way I see THEM investing in this community because Lee and Sara have invested in them. Because we have invested in them. They are being disciples. Visiting the Homeplace. Spending the day at Uspiritus. The other day a few of them came over and just started helping me unload the groceries from my car. It's a harvest for the Kingdom that God would be proud of. That's the second lesson of this parable. Take what God has given you and make the best of it. Whatever God has given you. Make the best of it in school, at work, at home. These gifts from God, God trusts you will make the best of them. This creation, this amazing life we have been given, how are we using it? How are we caring for it? How are we caring for one another? What are we doing with all these gifts that ultimately belong to God?

Last but not least, we have the cautionary tale of the third slave. The one who buries the talent entrusted to him. He hides what the master has given him because it doesn't matter as long as the master gets it back, right? It doesn't matter because he's coming again soon, right? We can just hide and close ourselves off and not be part of the world. It's an understandable response. I imagine early Christians were tempted to do that because they thought Jesus was returning very soon. So they didn't need to use God's gifts for God's mission. They didn't need to work with what they had and make the best of it. Because it would all be over with soon. So why not sit and wait?

No, no. A thousand times no, is what Jesus is saying. That's lazy thinking. That's outer darkness behavior. That's the kind of sloppy discipleship that leads to weeping and gnashing of teeth. I expect you to be busy while I'm gone. I expect you to be working to increase the Kingdom, not sitting on what you have. The master asks the third slave, "Why didn't you at least put the money in the bank? Why didn't you do the bare minimum with what I gave you?" Because I was afraid, says the third slave. I knew that you reaped where you didn't plant and you

gathered where you didn't sow. So I was afraid. It sounds like an honest confession, doesn't it? Except that it isn't. Because what the slave is really saying is that he hoped that the master would do the work. He hoped other harvests would make up for his lack of effort.

I was afraid, says the slave. And so he did nothing. He did nothing with what he had been given. Maybe he worried: What if he lost everything? What if he tried to make those talents productive and he failed? We worry about that as the church. We worry about failing. We worry about losing what we have. If we say too much. If we forgive too much. If we love too much. If we give too much to our community. What if we run out and end up with nothing? What if we die? So we are tempted to hide what God has given us. And we circle the wagons. And we just strive to make it until Jesus comes or until the church can give us a nice funeral. But Jesus says that unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it can't be fruitful. The Kingdom of God isn't about money or resources. It's about trust and hope and faith. It's about the gift of God's love. Which is higher than the highest mountains and deeper than the deepest ocean. We have the priceless treasure of God's heart in Jesus Christ. It

has been entrusted to us to share carelessly and wildly. It's not cheap but it's free. And it actually increases when we give it away. When we put others first. When we give what someone doesn't deserve. Faith.

Forgiveness. Mercy. Trust. That's the profit God wants us to turn.

At our regional presbytery meeting last week, we officially closed the Nicholasville Presbyterian church. Their congregation knew that it was time. It was time for their mission and ministry to come to an end. They had done what they could together as God's people. And in the end, they did something marvelous. They didn't just sit on their resources and spend them all out until it was done. They took all that they had left and they gave it to the presbytery to fund the next mission in Jessamine County. Whenever and wherever that fruitful opportunity might be.

We are followers of Jesus, the one who gives his life for the life of the world. And we are the church that shares that grace. Even at the risk of losing our life. We have been entrusted with the great big gift of God's love. And we can't sit on that. We can't hide it. We are to make the best of what we have and let it be fruitful. This beautiful life, this beautiful creation we have been given to care for. How can we make it better?

How can we make it more beautiful for our master? Because we live in  
Faith, not in fear. To the glory of God.