Sermon: Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon for Meadowbrook Congregational Church by Dr. Katelyn Brackney
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The Parable of the Talents

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his
property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each
according to his ability. Then he went away. At once 16 the one who had received the
five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. 17 In the same
way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had
received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's
money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with
them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five
more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five
more talents.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you
have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter
into the joy of your master.' 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward,
saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.'
23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been
trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy
of your master.' 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward,
saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and
gathering where you did not scatter, 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in
the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 But his master replied, 'You wicked and
lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did
not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my
return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from
him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 For to all those who have, more will be
given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what
they have will be taken away. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer
darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

There are both helpful and harmful ways of preaching this text, and oftentimes this text, particularly because of the ending, is preached as a story

about the afterlife or "judgement" day. But the focus of this parable should not be on the end so much as the beginning. While the imagery of darkness and weeping/gnashing teeth is there at the end, it is more representative of how the end we hope for should influence what we do with our lives and what has been given to us. Again, that idea of keeping in mind future hope and present reality we talked about last week. And I'll come back around to this in a moment.

For now, let's go back to the beginning. The scene opens on a master or Lord, (the Greek *kyrios* word for Lord can be translated either way here), who is headed out of town for a while and he decides to entrust three of his servants with some of his property, specifically, "talents." To each he gives a different quantity based on their abilities. To one he gives 5 talents, another 2, and the last 1. Now, it's important to know that a talent is a quantity of money, and not just a quantity, but a very significant quantity. One talent would have been the equivalent of about 15 years or more worth of wages, and for some servants would have been more than they would have made in their entire lifetime. So the fact that he gave multiple lifetimes worth of money to two of the three, and then roughly a lifetime's worth to the other is no small thing. Being entrusted with such a sum, I can imagine, would have been pretty exciting, if not overwhelming!

Quite some time passes, and while the master is away, two of the servants invest the money given and end up earning back double what they started with. But the third servant was scared and instead of doing anything with the talent he digs a hole and hides the money away. When the master returns and goes to settle the accounts of each, he learns what they did with the talents given them. To the two who doubled their investments he welcomes them "into the joy of your master," but to the one who hid the talent, even though he did not lose it, we see that he is deeply disappointed, even angry at him and throws him into the dark street. Similar to last week's story where the bridesmaids that didn't have enough oil were locked out of the party, it seems like a harsh reaction to throw

out someone who didn't lose anything, but simply made a different judgement call…

As I was reflecting on this, one way of understanding the ending for this servant that I found particularly helpful comes from a commentary by Dirk Lange, where he describes the third servant's choice as not only hiding the talent, but burying *himself* as his ending is not so much condemnation as he has condemned himself to a place/a life that doesn't know joy, but only darkness and wailing. It is a self-created place or state that is a result of not stewarding what was given to him. Of not participating the joy of the one who gave him so much.

But again, while this ending is part of the story, the main purpose I want to focus on is less about this particular ending and more about what the servants did with the talents while the master was away, as well as what was given them in the first place.

This story exists within Jesus' eschatological discourse, or the parables with which he instructs his disciples to endure through difficulty with anticipation of the Lord's return, and amidst that anticipation to live faithfully with intention and commitment to contributing to the kingdom of God.

It may feel like I'm beginning to repeat myself here when it comes to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven as this has been the focus for sometime now, but the amount of time Matthew spends, and really that Jesus spends, on this topic should show us just how important it is for Jesus's followers, us included, to understand it.

I also have to say that it also feels a bit convenient that this particular story that has to do with money is given to us during the season that most churches have their stewardship season, where we reflect on and commit to what we will give to the church over the next year. But I want to be clear that this parable isn't actually talking about economic prosperity or even economic choices, necessarily. Sure, you could read it that way, but if we look at what Jesus has been

sharing about the kingdom of heaven throughout Matthew, and what the focus of the parables he has been sharing most recently are, I think it becomes easier to see (hopefully) what he was intending, which in this story begins with understanding God as a generous God who entrusts us with abundance, and continues with great joy in seeing God's people recognize and utilize that abundance for the flourishing of the kingdom.

This story was told to the disciples in a time when there was great anticipation of the Lord's return, and this story speaks to what it looks like to live faithfully in the midst of the waiting for that return, calling those who hear to consider what they will do with what has been given to them as they do so.

And we know that waiting can be hard, even anxiety inducing, at times. Whether we are waiting for test results, or a raise, the birth of a child or grandchild, or for your coffee order to be ready - life is made of waiting. We are about to enter the season of Advent where we wait with expectation for the birth of the Christ. We are already waiting for the kingdom of God to be on earth as it is in heaven. We are waiting for things to be made right and whole. We are familiar with waiting. So what do we do in the waiting?

I couldn't help but think of a video I saw floating around the internet several years back where there was a social experiment for young children were there were several young kids, maybe three to five years old, who were each brought into separate rooms and at table in front of them was a marshmallow or piece of candy. And they were told that if they waited until the adult in the room came back to eat the candy they would get even more candy or marshmallows. And then the adult would leave the room, and the camera stays on the kid just staring at the treat in front of them. Some of the kids would talk to themselves about not eating it, some would just stare in silence, some would push the treat away from them in an effort to not eat it, others would eat it right away. It's

adorable and well worth watching, but also so interesting to see them process what to do while they waited, and if it was worth waiting with intention.

While not a perfect or exact parallel or metaphor, it kept coming to mind for me because, again, it's about what we do in the waiting. I've said it again and again, that we are called to participate in bringing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven - to be people who are joining God in the work God is already up to in the world. The work of justice, mercy, love, compassion, peace, restoration, and more. And in today's parable, the work the master or Lord is up to is given to the servants to be up to as well, and they either choose to engage it or hide from it.

When we look at the life of Jesus we can see the abundance of love and care God has for people, we can see the time spent caring for others, we can see the invitation to do the same through lessons like the beatitudes and more.
So when the master of this story welcomes the servants who waited with faithful action into his "joy,"
when we see the joy of the kids and the adult when the adult gave the kids who waited intentionally more candy,
when we choose to wait for the fulfillment of all things, for the end when all is made right and well and whole with intentional, faithful, action of joining in God's good work, we enter that joy, too.
And inherently that joy spills over into community as what God is up to is always communal flourishing.

So today, I want us to reflect on how we are waiting. Are we waiting in fear and hiding away from or hoarding the abundance given to us for the sake of the kingdom? Or are we choosing to faithfully join in the ministry of Jesus and using that abundance for the flourishing of all people? I'll leave you with this quote from Carla Works's commentary on Matthew...she says,

> What does faithfulness look like in a time of waiting? In Matthew's Gospel faithfulness is emulating the ministry of Jesus. Jesus has announced the

> arrival of God's kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least...All who would follow Jesus are to preach the good news of the kingdom to the whole world (24:14) by going about the work that the master has called them to do (24:24–51). This work includes visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, and feeding the hungry (25:31–46). Those who are found faithful may hear their Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant." (Working Preacher - Carla Works)

May we wait with intention and faithfulness, choosing to join the work before us and enter into the joy of the Lord. Amen.