**While we are away … reflections for the Pentecost season**

**November 15, 2020 – 24th Sunday after Pentecost**

*We are heading into the final weeks of Pentecost and the final weeks of the Church Year. We finish with 3 parables from Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 25. Jesus presents dramatic pictures that are appropriate for the coming drama of his Passion.  Here is a message from Pastor Steve for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost.*

**Lessons for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost**

**1 Thess. 5:1-11; Psalm 90; Matthew 25:14-30**

The ‘outer darkness’ is back. Another tough parable of Jesus leads us to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This familiar, ‘parable of the talents’, takes us to another memorable and dreadful ending – the servant being tossed out in the darkness surrounded by the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

How did we, the hearers of the parable, get here. How did the servant, the foil of the parable, get here?

It begins with a man going on a journey. We could stop and ask all kinds of questions: Who is this man? Where is the man going? What will he do on this journey? Where did he get all his property? This is not the point of the parable, but we do learn two things about this man and his journey. First, it will be a journey that takes a long time. Second, the man is rich – very rich. The parable speaks modestly of 5 - 2 and 1 talents, but there is great value lurking in that Greek term, “talent”. It is a measure – a measure of silver. One talent was worth about 15 years of wages of an average worker. The man is handing over to his servants – some translations say, ‘slaves’ – a small fortune - by any measure. There are no instructions, just a lot of money changing hands.

According to their abilities, the servants are entrusted with vast sums of money. The 5-talent servant goes out, trades with the money he has been given and doubles his money. The 2-talent servant does the same. We have no idea what these servants did for the man, but they are familiar with the concept: ***“making money work for you”.*** For the first two servants, things have gone well. Now, we come to the “but” of the parable. “*But the one who had received one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.”* We take note of this servant who is unable to follow the lead of the others and literally buries his talent in the ground. Wow!

Now we get to see how this will all play out. The man returns, ‘after a long time’, and wants an accounting. How did his servants do with the small fortune he had entrusted to them? The first two come forward, happy to report how they have doubled their master’s money. They are commended, “Well done, my good and trustworthy servants. Well done.” The third servant, the one who buried his talent, comes forward for his accounting and has nothing additional to offer the master, just the one talent he had been given with grains of dirt still clinging to it. He does have some strong words to offer: *“I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent.”*

These are striking words! They certainly strike the master who has entrusted his wealth to this servant. He is not happy. Not at all! Thus, begins the downhill spiral that will lead to the servant being cast into the outer darkness.

The servant’s words struck the master - But don’t they strike us as well? The brutal honesty of the servant: ***“I was afraid.”***? He was afraid of his master whom he was supposed to be serving. He was afraid, paralyzed. He could not act. He could not do anything with the incredible sum of money he had been given. He was so afraid he buried the talent. He himself was buried by fear. He was shut down by fear leaving him no imagination, no capacity to engage.

I thought of two things as I reread this parable and thought of the plight of the fearful servant. I thought of Martin Luther in his early days of spiritual wrestling with God. He could only imagine a harsh, judging God. He could only imagine the punishments he risked whatever he did. He tried to bury himself in that monastery confessional. I also thought of a neighborhood ministry that we were part of when we lived in West Chester – ***The Care Center for Christ.*** One of the ministries was to open up the Center for elementary school and middle school youth on Friday evenings. There would a craft activity, a devotion, and refreshments. One evening, one of our members, a former shop teacher, brought buckets with small pieces of wood – blocks in all shapes and sizes – big circles, small squares, triangles, dowels, rectangles. Each child was given a flat board, a pile of assorted blocks and given a chance to build and create. I sat with Jerome and watched him as he just stared at the blocks. I tried to put a couple of blocks on top of each other, “Hey, look at this!”, but Jerome just sat and looked. I am forever struck by that fifteen minutes in the Care Center for Christ. My boys had grown up with blocks and Legos – they would have rejoiced at chance to build something. Yet, here was Jerome, probably about 10, who could not engage, who seemed to have no imagination to use his building talents. He was in a cloud of darkness at our table that evening. It was striking.

One of the parts of this parable that we can overlook – especially because it takes us to the outer darkness – is the **joy** in the heart of the parable. The master commends the two servants who were able to engage and says, ***“Come, enter into the joy of your master.”*** Yes, there is to be joy with this master. There is to be joy in playing with blocks. Yes, there can be joy when your picture of a harsh God is completed by the picture of the loving Savior who went to the depths of darkness in love to rescue us on the Cross.

Today’s parable is disturbing because it shows us a person who was so afraid he could not use his talent, he could not engage with what he had been given. He lived with the darkness of fear. He lived in the darkness of not knowing, not understanding the master; not knowing, not understanding the joy that master has in store for us. This is a disturbing parable because the servant ends up in the darkness. Maybe Jesus wants us to be disturbed enough that we reach out to those who are in darkness, to those who are in fear, to those who are not able to engage, who are not able to imagine a loving God who wants them to be joyful builders in the kingdom.

There is an urgency in the lessons these last few Sundays of the church year. The outcomes in Jesus’ parables have intensified. The other lessons urge us to engage as well – last week, Amos admonished the people: “Let justice roll down like waters, righteousness like and ever-flowing stream.” Today, Paul writes to the Thessalonians about the coming of the Day of the Lord. The people were in despair, living in a fearful, dark world. The people were worried that the Day was not coming, and their hope in God was giving way to fear as they waited for their master who was away.

Paul speaks words we heard from Jesus last week: “keep awake”. Then Paul offers reassurance: “*But you, beloved, are not in darkness, you are children of the day and of the light. Put on the breastplate of faith and love, put on the helmet of hope. For God has not destined us for wrath but obtaining salvation through Jesus Christ.”* Paul says, that future, your future, is secure. Keep the faith, share love, hold on to hope. Do not be paralyzed by fear, live each day in the light. Paul’s final instructions are for the present: “Encourage one another and build up each other.”

These are certainly words for us in our day. We have been through, we are going through quite a lot. There are reasons to be afraid, the pandemic goes on, the cases increase; the election results have caused much disease, unrest and uncertainty for how we might move on productively with our politics. So, Paul says: “Encourage one another and build each other up.”

I want to close with a shout-out to a ministry “Peaceful Living” that is doing just this -encouraging and building up. I had the privilege of joining “Peaceful Living” in my first, brief retirement. My opening worship video ended at the campus of this caring agency that finds ways to connect special people with special needs and special talents into community, by giving them the gift of belonging. In the video, I suggest that one place to invest our money, our talents, would be to invest in people – that is what Peaceful Living does. With its residential homes, day centers, supervised employment, there are incredible servants, sharing their incredible talents of love and patience to help Peaceful Living residents. I have seen these people helping others to participate in worship, fellowship, craft activities, jobs in the community. I have seen the aides and volunteers help women and men and their families overcome challenges so that talents can be unburied and brought to light, so that hesitations caused by fear and insecurity can be overcome, so that special people can experience joy - the joy of community, the joy of Christ.

To be sure, today’s parable has a dire ending – no one wants anyone to land in outer darkness. This is an urgent parable of Jesus. Paul shares urgent words – watch, stay awake, the time is coming. There is an urgency to Jesus’s ministry - the kingdom of God is calling. The kingdom of God that promises joy and light to overcome fear and darkness. Today the kingdom call is urgent: “bring your talents, use your talents, without fear, without hesitation. There is joy with the master in doing the work of the master.” There is joy because the master has paid the price, a price beyond all the talents in the world – the Cross!. So, we are free to joyfully bring whatever we have.

Amen.