

**The Church Is the Treasure**

**20171119**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

Grace and peace to you from Our Father in Heaven and from the One we’re waiting for, Our Lord, Jesus Christ, amen.

I don’t often begin our sermons with a prayer, but today I think it’s appropriate. So, please pray with me. Creator God, maker of all things, you have gifted your church with uncountable talents. Sometimes we’re wise and use our talents for good purposes, investing them in usefulness to your kingdom. At other times, we’re afraid, and do not use what you have given us in ways that promote the gospel or the work of your kingdom in our world. Through the power of your Holy Spirit, teach us to be wise stewards of your property. Drag us out of our apathy, fear, and laziness and give us courage to invest ourselves for the growth of your church. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

I’ve had times in my life when I was afraid to take any action for fear of the criticism that would surely follow. I felt like a puppy dog that had been beaten and every time the master came home I ran to hide in the corner. I’m working on my fears with my spiritual director, but anxiety is a hard thing to overcome. As a result, I’m reluctant to be the leader I know I could and should be. I’m hesitant to risk my job and reputation even in light of how some, even small changes, might spur growth in the Church… On the other hand, if I really trusted in God’s love and forgiveness, why would I care about my personal fears. Why would I not totally invest myself and forget about the ramifications? After closely reading today’s Gospel, I wonder if God looks at our fears, no matter how well grounded, as laziness, maybe even a lack of faith… In our text the Greek word translated as lazy from the lips of the returning Master can mean hesitation caused by anxiety… We don’t take risks because we’re anxious or afraid of how we might look to our friends and others. We don’t take risks because we’re afraid of failure and how that might damage our reputations. We don’t take risks because, unfortunately sometimes we are just plain lazy.

In the twenty-forth and twenty-fifth chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, just prior to his account of our Lord’s passion and resurrection, the emphasis of Jesus’ teachings shift to the subject of eschatology (that is, the end of time). It begins with Jesus’ prediction of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, to which his amazed disciples ask, “When will this take place?”

Of course, Jesus answers the disciples’ question by telling them that no one knows when the end will come, not even himself. Instead, after offering his disciples a description of the last days, Jesus tells his last three parables. They’re designed to change the focus of the disciples’ thoughts away from their question of ***when*** this will happen, to ***how they should live*** in the intervening time between his ascension and the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom. Our Gospel lesson for this morning presents us with the second of these three parables intended to offer us, who live in this intervening time, instruction and encouragement for our life.

Jesus says, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them…” I think it’s safe to assume the “man going on a journey” is none other than Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord. The journey is his ascension back to his heavenly Father, to await the end of time and His second coming. Right from the beginning of this parable, we encounter the grace of God. During His life, Christ’s toil and sacrifice established his property – his kingdom, his Church. The salvation and redemption from sin and death is truly a gift of love and compassion. As he departs to return back to the glory of the Father He entrusts his property to his disciples. Down through the ages that trust has been handed down again and again until it reached final, you guessed it, to us!

We may not like the idea of being referred to as slaves, as our text this morning translates the text. The Greek word *doulos* can mean either slave or servant. Either way, the point is clear. We who have been entrusted with our Lord’s property, we to whom our Lord has entrusted his church, we to whom the Lord has entrusted his ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness, do not own the property. The Church belongs to Christ! We are but his stewards, his servants, and yes, His slaves, entrusted with the responsibility of managing his property. According to this parable, the value of the property that our Lord entrusts to us is tremendous! To one servant he gives five talents, to another two, and to the third one, each according to their ability. When you consider that a “talent” was the equivalent of 15 to 20 years’ wages for a common laborer, the value of the property entrusted to the servants was worth millions. In other words, what the Lord has entrusted to his servants was worth more than any one of them could possibly imagine to accumulate in their lifetime.

Now, the first two servants took what was entrusted to them, and met the challenge with enthusiasm. We are told that they immediately went off and dared to risk investing what they had been given to the best of their ability, and were able to turn a profit for their Lord. They reacted to their Lord’s trust, and used the gifts they had to further their Lord’s kingdom. The third servant went out and buried his master’s money. He was fearful of losing what had been entrusted to him. He was afraid to risk using his abilities to further his master’s kingdom. The third slave was frozen by fear, anxiety, sloth, you name the cause… The result was that he did nothing with what his Lord had entrusted to him.

When the master returns from his long journey, he summons his servants to give an account of what they had done with what he entrusted to them. The first two servants are excited to report what they had accomplished, and receive the praise of their master. The third servant, however, approaches his master apologetically, as if he realizes he had not been faithful with what had been entrusted to him. In fact, his Lord even reprimands him for not investing what he had been given in the bank, which the master could have done before he left, and at least received some interest on his money.

Taken in context, this parable speaks to us who live in the intervening time between our Lord’s ascension, and God’s fulfillment of his kingdom at the end of time. It’s a challenge to every one of us who have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, who have become servants of our Lord, who have been entrusted with the Gospel – to do what we can to increase God’s kingdom, which our Lord has purchased with his blood.

What has been entrusted to us is a treasure so great, that none of us could ever imagine working to achieve it. We’ve been entrusted with proclaiming the gift of God’s grace, which not only offers to the people of God’s kingdom the redemption from their sins and past mistakes in life, but it also offers them the freedom to begin to live life anew—a fresh start. Knowing God’s forgiving grace empowers us to risk using our abilities to further our Lord’s kingdom.

I believe the reason the first two servants received praise from the Lord upon his return, was not solely based upon the financial reward they received on their investment. After all, the third servant wasn’t criticized for not doubling his master’s money, but for not doing anything with what had been given to him. Of the three servants, he had the least ability, and would not have been expected to do as much as the other two. If he had just put the money entrusted to him into the bank, if he would have just endeavored to gain a little interest on what the Lord had given him, he may not have been so harshly rebuked. No, the emphasis of this parable is not on what we can accomplish for our Lord to earn his praise, but that as his disciples and servants, we have a responsibility to use the gifts that our Lord has given us to further his kingdom. As persons who have received our Lord’s forgiving grace and the promise of eternal life, we have been entrusted with the treasure of our Lord’s kingdom and asked to do what we can to help it grow.

May we be quick to use everything God has given us to his glory and to grow his Kingdom. May we never be afraid of how God will react if we use our gifts, but fail in the attempt. May we greet the Lord with enthusiasm on the great day of judgment. Amen.