

Judges 4:1-7

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

For the last several weeks, in the gospel lessons, we've been hearing different aspects of Jesus' ministry. He's been verbally sparring with the Temple hierarchy about the laws and practices of Judaism. He's done a good job of sidestepping their attempts to trap him into saying something that will ultimately condemn him. He evades them every time. And then he shifts to explaining to us how we should treat one another as members of the church. For the last few weeks he has been telling us parables that help explain the nature of the kingdom of God. We've heard about the king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son, but none of the invited guests would come, so the king invited anyone and everyone that his messengers found in the streets. And we heard about the vineyard owner who paid the laborers who came late in the day the same wages he paid those who had worked since early morning which seemed to us to be completely unfair. And Jesus told us who the honored people in the kingdom of God would be when he gave us the Beatitudes....it's the poor, the peacemakers, the meek and those on the margins of their worlds. Last week we heard about the ten bridesmaids and the value of planning ahead. None of these lessons end well for those who aren't paying attention.

This week Jesus is telling us about how a rich man's slaves used the talents he had given them to use while he was away. From a human perspective, Jesus' explanations about the Kingdom of God seem somewhat unfair. The rules in that kingdom don't seem to be the same ones we use in the kingdom of earth. It takes a bit of mental gymnastics to figure out exactly what Jesus is trying to tell us about the kingdom he's preparing us for and the kingdom he wants us to try to initiate here on earth. Sometimes between heaven and earth, things seem to be a bit upside down. Jesus tells us along the way that he has come to shake things up. His presence and his teachings while he's here with us require that people take sides and they must reassess their values just like we do. There will be divisions on earth between the people who are striving for the kingdom of God and the folks who are working to maintain the status quo here on earth. What Jesus teaches about how things work in the kingdom of God is very different from how they work here on earth. That's good news to the poor and the disadvantaged and those who find themselves on the fringes. That's bad news to those who are comfortable with the status quo.

The parable about the talents that we've just heard is one with many layers of meaning. It begins by telling us about the extravagance of the man preparing to leave on a journey. Some

interpretations see this man as God. Other commentaries say that the man is Jesus...because he's here with us for a while; then he leaves; and he's expected to come back. And St. Paul reminds us that we are slaves to Jesus. So...this man gives three of his slaves different amounts of money according to their abilities. The amount of money he gives each one of them is exorbitant. One talent represents 15 years of labor for the average worker, so even the one who got the least was in a position to never have to work another day in his life. The generosity of this man is far beyond anything we might expect. And he has given to each according to their abilities. So the most talented of the three gets the most talents. And the least talented one gets the fewest talents. So often when we hear sermons about this parable, it emphasizes not our money as an asset, but our abilities...our talents...as the asset. And we all know that some people are simply more talented than others. And we know that some people don't use the talents they have. And still others seem to have few if any talents. The distribution is not equal...in Jesus' parable or in life itself.

Not too long ago I heard an explanation about how the circulation of money...or the circulation of talents, if you will...contributes to growing an economy. Just suppose, for example, that we track one particular \$5 bill. It's used to pay for a haircut. The barber needs a ride home on short notice, so he uses the \$5 to pay for an Uber ride. The Uber driver needs to put gas in his car so that he can continue to pick up fares, so he uses the \$5 to top off his tank. The owner of the gas station uses the \$5 to pay one of his employees. And it goes on and on just like that. In this example, \$20 worth of goods and services have been consumed by the circulation of just one \$5 bill.

Suppose the same analogy could be used to describe what happens when we use the gifts or the talents God gave us. Suppose one person has a talent for writing, so he decides to write a nice note to the woman across the street telling her how beautiful her lawn and garden are and how much he enjoys seeing it every day. The woman's spirits pick up hearing this praise and she is inspired to cut some of her flowers and take them to the elderly lady down the street whose husband has just died. The visit and the flowers have the effect of making the widow feel less lonely and she is reminded that she belongs to this community. She begins to feel like she wants to venture out a little more, so she bakes some cookies for the little boy across the street whose parents don't seem to be around very much. The cookies remind the little boy that someone does know that he's there and that someone cares about him. His spirits improve a bit and so does his participation in school. Do you see how the talents get spread? Do you see how they build community? Do you see how investing in each other can make each of us feel stronger and more useful? Perhaps this is the way the kingdom of God is built. The talents grow and expand when we invest in each other.

But there's one more thing about this parable that we need to consider...and that's the relationship between the slaves and the master. The two slaves with the greater number of talents seem to be able to use them and invest them with great confidence and abandon. They don't seem to be too worried about what might happen if they take a risk and lose all they have. They go into this venture with a sense of confidence, not a sense of foreboding.

The third slave, however, has a completely different approach. He is very fearful of his master...afraid of what might happen if he takes a risk...even a small one...and loses the only talent he has. What would the master do to him? He is so constricted by fear that he can't make a move. He doesn't dare take any risk at all, so he buries his talent so that it will be safe. When the master returns, he can return to the master the gift he'd been given. Safety is more important to the third slave than anything else. He wants to be safe. The fear paralyzes him. But he is not rewarded by the master when the master returns. As a matter of fact, the master is as angry and as disappointed with the slave's lack of initiative as the slave had feared the master would be if the slave risked and lost the one talent he had. Burying the talent kept it safe, in a sense; it was unused and therefore did nothing to inspire or create something in someone else. The unused talent buried in the ground was just as worthless as it would have been had the slave risked it and then lost it. And the one thing the slave had tried to avoid...the master's wrath...is actually what happens to him for being too cautious and frightened to do anything at all. The slave's fearful and constricted attitude about the master's generous gift to him ends up being the slave's rejection of both the gift and the master himself. We all know how we feel if we give someone we care about something valuable and they never take it out of the box and use it. That's what the third slave did. He rejected the master and the gift. Part of the master's wrath may have been about his feeling of having been rejected by his slave as much as it was about the slave doing nothing with his talent. Surely, both slave and master lost out.

So what's holding you back? Or have you found your talent and are now using it joyfully? Do you have a stirring in the back of your head or in the depths of your heart about something you want very much to do, but you just can't get yourself to do it? Is it the 'talent' that God gave you that is going unused, undeveloped and unexamined? Is it something that will touch others and inspire them? Is it something that you have prayed about? Is it something that just won't leave you alone? Does it keep popping up in your thoughts or in the back of your mind? Are you afraid you might risk everything and lose? That's always a possibility!! These are all questions that occur to us when we begin thinking about what it is that God is calling us to do and whether or not we feel equipped to do it. Our sense of feeling either ready or qualified to do something figures less in this equation than we might think. Nobody ever feels qualified to answer a call from God. But God uses all kinds of people with all kinds of talents for a variety of different reasons and in all sorts of places. You can't outguess God!!

Do you know the most frequently repeated phrase from Jesus? It's "Do not be afraid!"
Whatever God has put on your heart or in your mind is the talent that God doesn't want to go unused. Don't reject God. Open the box and see what beautiful gift God has given you and allow God to lead you into the world to use it.

And then say.....

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.