

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.
Amen

For God has destined us not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

One of my favorite quotes about reading the bible came from the pen of Mark Twain.

Although he was a skeptic in his beliefs about God, he did occasionally have observations about the hypocrisy of some people when it came to the practice of their religion.

One of my favorite Twain quotes concerns biblical interpretation.

Twain wrote that people always would say to him that they were troubled about the parts of the bible they read, but couldn't understand.

Maybe they had been reading sections of Leviticus on certain food laws, or long prophecies about middle eastern countries that no longer exist.

Mark Twain wrote, though, that he never really worried about the parts of the bible that he couldn't understand.

Instead, what worried him most were the parts of the bible that he read and understood.

This is probably the type of reaction you have this morning when you hear 'the parable of the talents'.

It's not that we don't understand the story...

Instead, most of us understand the story and the point seems clear: do something with that talent, or else.

You'll probably not be surprised to hear that this lesson elicited a lot of debate in this week's staff meeting.

The folks on the church's staff split pretty evenly between those who didn't like the way that the master acted...

It did not seem very Jesus-like for them to throw that lazy servant into the outer darkness; that place with all that weeping and gnashing of teeth...

The other group thought it was a stark lesson about the way God expects you to use the talents, or money, you have been given...

As someone observed, Jesus in the parable is trying to get us out of our comfort zone.

So what does this parable say to you? Do you want to disregard its message or delve more deeply into what Jesus is trying to teach us?

One clue to its meaning might be the way that Jesus starts this story. He uses the familiar words, "**the kingdom of heaven will be...**"

In the gospels Jesus uses parables to describe his understanding of the kingdom of heaven, but this kingdom concept can be a bit elusive. What do you think Jesus means when he says this?

Is Jesus saying that this is how things are going to be in this world right now at this moment?

Or is he talking about when he returns?

Or does he mean that this is how things will happen in heaven, in the life that is to come?

I have always believed Jesus was trying to wake up his listeners.

Maybe you recall in Luke's gospel when he returns to his hometown, he reads from the Isaiah scroll, the following:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor....

Jesus tells the hometown folks that this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. **The kingdom of heaven is at hand...**

You may recall that the folks in Nazareth don't greet this good news with joy or excitement; in fact Jesus has to flee for his life.

Whenever I think about the kingdom of heaven being at hand, I find myself time and time again coming back to this passage.

The poor hear good news...the captives are freed...the blind are given their sight...and the oppressed are given their liberty.

The story from Luke reminds us that the Kingdom's presence is not always comforting, and at times it can be dangerous.

Perhaps this is what Matthew is trying to get across to us in this morning's story...

What it means to come close, to be touched, by the good news of God's kingdom...

While it is easy to focus our attention on the poor servant that gets tossed into the outer darkness...I want to spend some time focusing on a few other points...

First the story reminds us that we are to be slaves, or servants, of Christ...the man going on a journey summons his slaves and he entrusts his property to them...

Jesus entrusts us in the same way with his gospel, his message of reconciliation and healing for the world....

In the same way that Jesus read the Isaiah scroll to his hometown folks, we have to be prepared at times for a similar reception...

The second point concerns the concept of "the talent". From what I read it was a term that usually referred to a large amount of money. It was enough gold or silver to employ 20 to 30 laborers for a full year.

The master's no fool. He gives each of the three slave's talents that were in proportion to their gifts; one of them got five, another received two, and the final servant got one.

While there are lots of points that can be made about using your gifts wisely, I think Jesus is trying to capture an important theme on the way we choose to respond to God's generosity.

Each of us has something to share with other people. Maybe we don't have enough money to hire 20 or 30 employees to work for five years, but there are other gifts, other things we enjoy doing that can be shared with other people in our community.

Have you ever spent an afternoon at the Suther's Center, or collected food for our food pantry?

Our Santa shop is coming up soon, this is good time of year to take your kids shopping for gifts for other children.

My carpentry skills are limited (my wife would say dangerous), but I always enjoy my time working on a Habitat home each year.

The point is that God wants us to use our gifts with a sense of joy, and not out of fear like that third servant.

We don't really know if the master in our story was a harsh man - the other two slaves don't mention it.

And their response to the master's generosity is to go out and make more, to do more with what they have been given.

The first two servants are excited.

For them, this is not a time of fear, but of prosperity

Their response is different because they both have a different type of relationship with the master.

The first two servants believe that God has provided and their call is to share that abundance with others...

In fact, I would be willing to argue that the master would have been happier with the third servant if he had just had the guts to try.

He might have squandered the one talent on a bad business deal; he might have traded a cow for a bunch of magic beans...

He might have done something that appeared so incredibly stupid that everyone around him would have said next to the dictionary definition of the word stupid there is a picture of that guy over there...

The third servant could have done any or all these things and at least, he would have tried.

He would have taken what God had given him and he would have recognized that God was putting his trust in him...and he would have taken a chance.

If that servant had just been willing to do that one thing, maybe God would have blessed what he did, even if things didn't quite work out as expected.

In getting out of his comfort zone...in walking away from his fear...

Maybe that third servant would have discovered that God truly was guiding his efforts and helping give him direction to change the course of his life.

And, consequently, help him change the lives of others that were waiting to be touched by God's kingdom.

In this morning's gospel, Jesus offers us the chance to exchange a life of fear for a new life that is on fire about the possibilities that Jesus' gospel offers this world.

Think again about the words Jesus used for his very first sermon in Nazareth, "Freedom for the captive...sight for the blind...good news for the poor".

This is not the kind of news that we hide in a mattress, or bury in a hole.

Instead, Jesus description of the kingdom is a call to dig up what we have buried and use those gifts to do God's work in the world.

Paul reminds us in his letter that "God does not destine any of us for wraith, but instead for obtaining salvation".

And God's Salvation does not protect us from making stupid decisions, in doing God's work in the world we always risk that possibility.

This story gives us the freedom to try, to fail, and to be welcomed back home just like any other prodigal.

Mark Twain said that it was the parts of the bible that he understood that worried him.

I want to invite you this morning to become a little worried.

Join me in becoming worried about how we respond to God's generosity.

I want you to become worried about the way we share God's love with others. Do our lives tell people that God is an angry judge or a loving generous father or mother?

The king will indeed one day return.

Are you ready to hear those words?

“Well done good faithful servant enter into the joy of your master!”

This is the kind of church I know that we can be...Amen