## Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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 seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Driving down Route 52 toward Mt. Airy last week, I spotted a small, dented, metal sign stuck into the grass next to the road. In red letters against a rusty white background were these words: “*This Country Needs Jesus*.” The thing about a sign like that, seen by chance and then quickly passed, is that one doesn't know who put the sign there or why, so its interpretation is up to the one who happens to see it. Some might dismiss the words as those of a zealot wanting to bring motorists into the next church they see. Others might feel a link to their own frustration with a nation whose problems, they believe, arise from a failure to follow the Son of God. As for me, I felt vaguely threatened by the message, which seemed to me to carry a warning of sorts: “Get Jesus or else!”

*“This Country Needs Jesus.”* Perhaps the person who stuck the sign there believes our country doesn't have Jesus. So how would we go about finding him? Getting him? Keeping him? Is it just our nation that needs him and doesn't have him? These questions swirled through my mind as I continued on my way. It's what happens sometimes when you're in the car alone driving some distance. “Wait a minute,” I thought. “This country *has* Jesus. This *world* has Jesus. In fact, the sign has it backwards.” I wanted to turn around and put up my own sign, *“God Has This World in God's Hands.”*

*“This Country Needs Jesus.” “God Has This World.”* Do you hear the difference? The first message is one of fear and scarcity. It makes us the lead actors in the drama of our lives. We don't have Jesus. We need Jesus. We must find Jesus and convince God to give him to us. The second is a message of hope and abundance. God *has* this world. God loves this world – all of it, this country and all the other beautiful places and people God has created: those who believe in him in a particular way and those who believe in other ways. Salvation is in *God's* hands. It's not something that we have to wait for or go out and find, not a limited commodity that we have to grab before someone else gets it.

God has this world. God is enough for this world, far, far more than enough. You and I are the recipients of God's grace. That realization changes the way I have always read this parable. A man, preparing to go away on a long trip, splits up his fortune among three of his slaves. He gives each slave the amount he believes that one can handle and then he leaves. The first two slaves take some chances and make more money for their boss but the third one is afraid of risk so he buries his portion in the ground until the landowner returns. All three slaves think they have done the right thing. Their boss is pleased with the efforts of the first two but deals harshly with the third one, not because he loses his boss' money but because he does nothing with what has been given to him.

I used to read this as a parable of warning against inaction, and maybe in a literal way it is. A human landowner gives his slaves some money and two of them make him more money while the third does not. Human actors. Human actions. Human responses. We understand that, we who often find ourselves at the mercy of bosses who expect us to fill their pockets. But if we interpret this parable literally, if we try to make one-to-one connections with God as the landowner and with each of us as his slaves, we risk missing the point entirely.

Listen again and hear the parable as one of hope and grace. God is not a slave owner and we are not his slaves, not in the way that has brought such tragedy upon this earth. However, like the owner in the story, God's actions are extravagant, maybe even ridiculous. God, who holds all things in heaven and on earth, gives us, God's servants, everything God has. In the gift of God's Son, we discover truth and love and grace, more valuable than all the land and gold and silver on earth combined. This is the Jesus we don't have to go out and get; this is the Jesus whom God gives to us out of pure love, not because we deserve him but because this is what God has decided to do. And then God tells us, “Do something with this gift. Share the love I have showered upon you. Change the world with what I have given you.” We do this not because we *have to* but because we *get to*. Our very lives, each breath we take and action we take, are a gift from God, intended not to be buried in the ground but passed along with generous and joyous hearts.

Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and prolific writer, explains this more eloquently than I ever could: “All we can give back and all God wants from any of us is to humbly and proudly return the product that we have been given – which is ourselves! If I am to believe the saints and mystics, this finished product is more valuable to God than it seemingly is to us. Whatever this Mystery is, we are definitely in on the deal! True religion is always a deep intuition that we are already *participating* in something very good, in spite of our best efforts to deny it or avoid it. In fact, the best of modern theology is revealing a strong “turn toward participation,” as opposed to religion as mere observation, affirmation, moralism, or group belonging. There is nothing to join, only something to recognize, suffer, and enjoy as a *participant*. You are already in the eternal flow that Christians would call the divine life of the Trinity.”

You and I are in on the deal! God brings salvation forward in time from the Jesus who lived in this world, who taught about and acted out the love of God, who died and was resurrected by his father, and back in time from that day when we will meet our Savior face to face. Past and future come together in this very moment, this moment in which you and I get to participate. God trusts us with all that is dearest to God and so we become part of God's dance of grace. Our words and movements may seem awkward and halting to us, but somehow they are beautiful to God.

Our movements bring love to the lives of others. We prepare a delicious Thanksgiving meal and it becomes both a gift to our neighbors and a foretaste of the meal we will all eat together in the kingdom to come. We help a family in crisis; the light and warmth they experience from when their electricity is turned back on reflect the light and warmth Jesus brings into the world. We pray for those who need healing; we call them and visit them, carrying the healing power of Jesus which redeems broken bodies in a broken world. We seek peace here and in our communities as a sign of what is being brought into this world by the Prince of Peace.

*“This Country Needs Jesus.”* Of course it does. But we needn't rush around wasting energy trying to find what we already have – the gift of God in Christ which makes us partners in God's saving work in our lives and in our world. It is a gift that we best not bury, not because that will incur the wrath of God, but because burying it will cause us to miss out on our part in the revelation of grace, a revelation which God, inexplicably, mysteriously, wondrously shares with the likes of you and me.

Amen.

*Pentecost 24A*

*November 19, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

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