

Pentecost 24, 11.15.2020

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

“Don’t Bury Your Talent”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.* Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church.

St. Mark’s is a church with many talented and committed members and friends. It is simply astounding to me how many different and gifted people call this church home. I am grateful to the many helping hands of St. Mark’s members and friends who share their talents and gifts for God and neighbor. As we suffer together, we will be a stronger church after the pandemic.

Today Jesus tells us again the well-known Parable of the Talents. Have you ever thought about the word “talent”? The English word “talent,” gets its meaning from biblical stories like today’s parable. A talent in the ancient world was not a coin; it was a “weight” used on a scale to value the accuracy of money. In English, the word “talent” eventually took on figurative meanings like “skill,” “ability,” or “gift,” and the original meaning of monetary weight largely fell from use.

However, it is noteworthy that the word “talent” continues to retain a meaning of “value.” This is easy to imagine when think of people who use their talents in the fields of sports, medicine, academics, industry, music and every field of endeavor. Who hasn’t heard the phrase, “what a waste of talent” applied to someone, who, by not making full use of their talents, never realizes the value of their gifts and abilities?

In the Roman world, one denarius was the daily wage of a day laborer. The talent Jesus referred to was a Roman silver weight valued at 3,000 Hebrew shekels or 8,883 Roman denarii. Now establishing the value of ancient weights and measures in modern terms is not easy, but let’s try. If a denarius was one day’s wage, 8,883 denarii would be worth almost 14 years of daily labor. Using the US federal minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, an eight hour day would be \$58.00, or the value of 1 denarius in contemporary US dollars. 1 Roman talent (or 8883 denarii @ 58.00 a day) would be equivalent to \$515,214 contemporary US dollars, roughly half a million dollars. So we may think of 1 talent as equivalent to 14 years of labor, or approximately \$500,000 dollars.

So before going on a journey, a man “*summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave 5 talents, to another 2, and to another 1, each according to his ability.*” The property entrusted to the servants was not insignificant: 5 talents are worth 2.5 million dollars; 2 talents are roughly worth 1 million dollars, and 1 talent about \$500,000 dollars.

Upon receiving these talents, the servants given 5 and 2 talents immediately went off and traded on them doubling the talents that had been entrusted to them, and the one entrusted with 1 talent, went and buried his talent. When the man returned from his travels he demanded an accounting of the sums entrusted to his servants. The first two were praised by the master, and put in charge of many more things. So the moral of the story up to here seems clear, hard work is rewarded with greater responsibility.

However, it's the servant who buried his talent who is really the focus of the parable. He had been given a golden opportunity to build upon the talent given to him, but he wasted both the potential of the talent and the time given to him by the master. The focus of the master's anger was that the "wicked and lazy" servant has squandered both the potential of the value of the talent and the time given to him. The condemnation is for not even trying to use what the master had entrusted to him. He was too afraid to even put it in the bank. The parable is not about failure. It is about fear of failure and not even trying. The master was angered that the servant had not risked anything at all. He had been given a golden opportunity and had buried it.

The deeper moral of Jesus' parable is that we should not bury our talent. By not making full use of God's gifts to us, our time, talents and treasures, we miss the greatest opportunity we have in life: the opportunity to use the valuable gifts and abilities entrusted by God to each of us. Once our lives are gone, the opportunity will not return. Missed opportunity, like Jesus says, is like finding oneself cast into outer darkness. So in a very real way, gifts and abilities – talents – are a weight, a burden and, a responsibility to God that we are called upon to use.

It is very hard to believe that Advent will begin in two weeks. We are already at the end of the church year. Like the image that Paul and Zephaniah use of the Day of the Lord, suddenly we are confronted with the end of the year and reminders of God's returning to his household and reckoning with his servants about how they have used the talents entrusted to them.

I think it's natural for human beings to be anxious about the Day of the Lord. It is natural that we want to know if we have used our time and talent wisely. We are anxious about how we will be judged. Yet Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 5:9, "*For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us.*" Apocalyptic themes at the end of the church year encourage us, while we are able, to control those things we have control over.

Many of you know I was a seminary and college professor. I have given many exams and read many student papers and theses. One thing is clear to me: it is too late to prepare for an examination

when the exam sheet is placed on the desk before the student. I know from teaching, students who use their time and talents to study diligently usually do well on exams. Students who blow off studying almost always fail. Jesus is urging us to take seriously the time and talents of grace that God has placed before each of us, and not to bury them.

We do not know the day or the hour when life's examination sheet will be placed before each of us. Paul says it will be like a thief in the night. Just when we think, "all is peace and safety" then will come a sudden destruction from which there will be no recovery. This is a bleak and unrelenting vision about the seriousness of the time and talent entrusted to each of us. Are our lives in order? Is our church in order? Is our society and world in order? This is not simply a spiritual question. The question of using our time and talents wisely means building lives, building a church and a world that are founded upon the gifts of many - time and talent well invested. The issues of God's justice, compassion and mercy are not achieved overnight. They take time. They take the lifetimes and talent of many.

I would like to tell you about a remarkable person. When I was a pastor in Japan, the oldest member of one of my churches was a man named Takeo Yamamoto. Mr. Yamamoto taught English at the local high school, and later, at a nearby university. He was born in 1905 and generations of prewar and postwar students learned English from him. He was also a faithful Christian. He was a founding member of one of the churches I served, and that congregation survives today because of his diligence and vision.

There was a time when the Western Synod of the Lutheran Church in Japan almost closed this small congregation. Mr. Yamamoto stood up at the synod assembly and spoke on behalf of the time and talents of many who had invested their lives in that church, and through them, the grace of God that had been entrusted to that congregation and through it to the wider church. Mr. Yamamoto said God would never let his grace return empty. He argued that you have to believe and you have to work. God calls us to believe in the time and talents God has given us as individuals and as a church, because if God gives us something, God intends to use it.

Mr. Yamamoto died and I officiated at his funeral. As you might imagine, in a rural industrial community, his funeral was attended by hundreds of people. Mr. Yamamoto had invested his life – his time and talents – for both his community and his church.

As Mr. Yamamoto lay dying in the hospital I visited him. His daughter and grandson were in the room, and he was unresponsive to their attempts to communicate with him. I knelt down close to his

bed and spoke into his ear, “Takeo, this is pastor McKenzie, your daughter and grandson are here with you. May we pray together?” Slowly his hands began to move from below the blanket, and he folded them gently across his chest. His daughter was astounded, her father had been able to hear all along, but was too weak to respond. At the end of his life, when he could no longer carry himself, his faith carried him, giving him the strength to pray. We prayed together, and Mr. Yamamoto died later that evening. He had been born in the year of the Russo-Japanese War, survived the Spanish Flu, lived through two World Wars, educated many, and helped to found and protect a Lutheran congregation.

As individuals, as a society, and as a church we build upon the efforts and investments of the time and talents of many. Like Mr. Yamamoto, the way we live affects the way we die. Even though we will not know the time or the hour, we need not meet it unprepared. Mr. Yamamoto had lived wisely investing his time and talents in his community and in his church. He did not bury his talent. He used it for God and neighbor, for church and community.

The past year, for us, has been like the reckoning of the Day of the Lord. The swiftness of the pandemic has laid bare the truth of our human society and its weaknesses of human self-centeredness, petty divisiveness, racism, and outright apathy toward the suffering and dying of others. The pandemic has seemed like darkness and the Day of the Lord. As Paul wrote, just when we think, “all is peace and safety,” then will come a sudden destruction. Are we prepared? Have we been using our time and talents for others to build up our community, to build up the church?

St. Mark’s is a church of many talented individuals. When we use our talents, our time and our treasures wisely for God and neighbor, we will be praised like the faithful servants in the parable: “*Well done, good and faithful servant... enter into the joy of your master.*”

Don’t bury your talent. The pandemic is teaching us that we need the time, talents, and treasures of all people to keep our community, church and world safe and thriving. Don’t bury the opportunity to use God’s gift of grace. When God gives us something, God intends to use it. Don’t bury your talent. When we invest ourselves in God’s mission of justice and mercy for others, God will say to us, “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*” Amen.