

“Between the Now and Not Yet” based on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

Delivered on November 15, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

In the world, there is often a perception that everything in our lives would be better, if we just had enough money. It's like if we won the lottery, then maybe, just maybe then, we could be happy. Financial security is a kind of salvation, a dream we think will solve our problems. Except, it never feels in reach for many of us, even if we are comfortable, there's always something more, something we need to protect.

So, you can imagine that for these three slaves, this was a huge pay day. Let me be clear, the word talent here does not mean abilities. A talent was a term for a huge chunk of silver, think between 60 and 100 pounds of silver. Remember that denarius, the Roman coin, from a few weeks ago. That coin represented the wage for one day's work, well, one talent equals 6,000 denarii, or 16-19 yrs of salary.

With all that troubles you in this world today, what would 16-19 years of salary mean for you? Think about that. What would you do if you received that much money upfront, right now? What if it was five times as much, or better still, what if it was 10 times as much? How would you feel if suddenly someone gave you that much money? Consider for a moment how your life might change. Imagine all your debts could be paid off, all your debts could be erased.

Now, I realize that the man in this story entrusted his property to these slaves or servants. But a parable is not an allegory. It's meant to give us a way to think about something. So, the money given to the slaves is not meant to signify a specific amount, but an extraordinary amount, a ridiculous and extremely valuable asset. It would be a mistake to make this parable into an allegory, and certainly, I don't want you to think of it this way, by making these talents into your personal skills and abilities, because that is not what is being mentioned.

These talents are huge chunks of silver. And they are a life changing sum of money. So, let me say it again to give you some perspective, based on a 6-day Jewish work week, one slave got 19 years of pay, a second 96 years, the third one got 192 years of salary. This is what would have been going through the minds of the disciples as they listened this parable. This is what they would have been picturing, when Jesus told them that a man gave his slaves 1, 5 and 10 talents each. One more perspective: Based on New Jersey's minimum wage for next year, in 2021, that's \$528,000 to \$2.64 million to \$5.28 million dollars.

It may feel like I'm belaboring this point, but seriously consider: What would you do if you were entrusted with that?

Certainly, you might hear this and think, why didn't the slaves run off with the money. They likely could have cashed these talents in and went off on their own journeys, like the master. For each of these slaves, this would have been an opportunity for freedom, not just from their

master, but from constraints in the world they lived in. They would have been extremely wealthy right away. It would have been for them salvation and freedom. But each one considered what was given to them, to be the property of their master. So, they waited for him to come back.

I think that to make sense of this parable, you have to look at it in the context of Matthew. As we have walked through this text this fall, we first saw Jesus talking to the leaders of Judaea, answering their questions and challenges, then turning them on their heads. Remember that toward the end of their discussions in the streets, they asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay the Roman tax of a single denarius. On this coin was the image of Caesar, but on each of us human beings, is the image of God. Jesus tells them, give to Caesar what is Caesar's, a worthless coin, and give to God what belongs to God, each and every human life.

Then Jesus hit them with the one-two punch telling of the greatest commandments to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. But why should they listen to him on that? Well, he just tells them creatively that he is God. That's why.

After that, the conversation shifts from Jesus in the crowds with the Judaeen leadership, to Jesus, away from the noise, with his disciples, meaning the 12 and others followers, and those closest to him. It was those who would soon see Jesus crucified and see him rise again, only to go off without them, leaving them to continue his work. So, this conversation is meant for those who would be his church, tasked with the duties of spreading the good news, of God's present and eternal Kingdom at work.

Jesus here is preparing the church for its long periods of waiting, and charging his disciples with doing the work to grow the Kingdom of God, but unlike the Master in the parable, Jesus promises that he is with us always, even to the end of the age. Yet, still it was from these 12 leaders and a few dozen, maybe a few hundred other followers, that the church goes out into the world and makes disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching these disciples to do all that Jesus has commanded. They would continue the work of God's reign, by loving God with all their heart, soul and strength, and loving their neighbors, even enemies, exactly as they love themselves.

Right after today's reading in the next passage in Matthew, Jesus will tell his disciples that whatever they do for the least among them – for the hungry, thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned – they are doing it for him, Jesus. They do it for their King who will return and judge all nations.

What we see here is that Jesus has given the disciples something valuable, more life changing than anything else in this world. It is certainly more valuable than the coins with Caesar's image, and more valuable than 19 to 192 years of wages. They have received this enormous

gift, and it is not to be kept for themselves, or to be maintained for their master. It is meant to be used in the world.

As I said earlier, it is a mistake to take a parable and try to make it into an allegory. What I mean, is that in an allegory, every part lines up to something, to make a point. But in a parable, every part is meant to make us see something in a new way. It's meant to expand our thoughts and help us understand God. Some of Jesus's parables are just sayings, others are stories like this.

The word talent in the English language which now means your abilities, got it's meaning from interpreting this story as God's gifts, or the skills each one of us is given, and our charge is to be good stewards of those gifts. This is a reasonable interpretation, but again, this is a parable not an allegory, so, this is meant to be, just one possibility. It's one way to look at it.

If we look at the story that way, then this portrays God as the one giving out the talents. Now, certainly this is a common way to look at this story, but it's not the only way. Another way to view this story, is as a worldly example, a human scenario, as in, what would a human do if giving a gift as incredible as what God gives us – love, grace and salvation? Indeed, a human would want that kind of gift back and they wouldn't stick around and help you in any way. That, of course, is not what we know about Jesus or God in any way. That is not God's character, so the allegory doesn't really work here.

So, in our period of waiting, let's consider what we learn from seeing the master as a human. This is not a new and innovative way of looking at it, preachers and interpreters in all ages preached this in some way. I'm not blazing a new trail here. But seeing it this way exhorts us to do two things in what I call between the 'now and not yet': First, that we should not hold God's love in, but take risks to share it with others. And second, to know God's character from the bible, who God really is, and not, who we think God is based on worldly values, how humans do things.

I say this phrase, between the 'now and not yet,' because it is where we are stuck right now. We are in a period of waiting, with a heightened awareness that our world around us is changing, and it's changing fast. The church has been always between now and not yet, since Jesus ascended to heaven, but the world as a whole, only gets this feeling in fits and spurts.

So, when the world is in these times that many in the church are tempted to say Jesus's return is imminent. Many a pastor has gone off and made bold predictions about the end of the world, and prophesied many a dismal tale, all of which were false prophecies, because none of them have ever come true. With the explosion of social media and the rapid change in our culture, it breeds conspiracy theories and ideological extremism and a nihilism in our youth rejecting a meaning of life, and that is frightening.

With the world gripped by this COVID-19 pandemic, and with such intense division in our political system, surely we are all tempted to say this is when Jesus is coming back, and I've seen preachers preach this. We've all been tempted to feel it, to feel like something is up. This has got to be the end right?

Friends, I want you to remember something, no matter how bad the world seems, Jesus and the Apostle Paul both describe the return of Christ as 'like a thief in the night.' Jesus told his disciples that no one, not even he knew when he'd be back. Famously, Paul tells the Thessalonians not to worry about it, they need nothing written about it. Instead, he tells them to encourage one another, build each other up, because God has given them salvation, not wrath.

Yet, as we humans love to do, we take this text, and use it to worry. We tear each other down, saying who is 'out' and who is 'in' for salvation. We obsess endlessly about God's wrath, and not as Paul advised, resting in our salvation in Christ. Here's a bit of advice: Do not waste your time predicting the end of the world and do not listen to preachers who do. I mean that.

For even if you think you can read the signs of the times, it will not matter anyway. Live prepared, that's our calling. Live prepared for Jesus to return by serving him, be ready, but do not obsess. Instead, build each other up. Comparing it to a thief in the night is not intended for you to set up a trap, or some alarm system, so you can do whatever you want in sin right now, but have a warning to tell you when to be ready. No, this is meant to tell you to be ready now and do not worry about it.

The truth we hold on to as Christians is that the Kingdom of God is both present and eternal. This means that the Good News we proclaim is that the Kingdom of God is here now, and that truth is in tension with the fact that it is also, not yet, until all is restored in the new creation. The Kingdom is here now because God shared in our humanity in Jesus, born a child as we are, to live as we live in all things but sin, and die on the cross, taking our sin there and defeating it.

Indeed, on that cross, Christ paid the price for us, and salvation is not something in question, but it is revealed in the Resurrection of Jesus. Indeed, God shared in our life, and fulfilled the law when humans could not, in order to preserve us, to share with us God's abundant and eternal life, through Jesus's sacrifice on the cross.

Indeed, we are made holy by believing in this. We are cleansed to be temples, to be the resting place of God's Holy Spirit in our hearts and in the church. That Spirit pours God's love into our hearts so that we might love, and follow the example of Jesus to love as he loved us. We do this by loving God with all our heart, soul and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. When we do this, we share in God's work, to reconcile all things to Him, until Jesus returns, and all are raised, to new life.

And so, my friends, this scripture parable today should remind us of two things: That we have been given an immeasurable gift greater than the security of \$5 million. You have the gift of knowing that Jesus defeated sin and death to save you, and that nothing you or any of us does earns this gift of salvation, but knowing we have it, we must not bury it, but must go out and share it with others, to give God the return on investment that God wants.

That desired return is the growth of the Kingdom, more and more people living by love. It means more and more people giving food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, without fear that if they give what they have, they will themselves come up short. God wants more people who welcome strangers, even those who might be threat to you. It is to have more and more people give hospitality to sinners, just like Jesus did, without fear of being corrupted by sin or killed. We are called to do it because we know that this is where God wants us to invest.

Jesus is calling more and more people to give clothes to the naked, and to give aid to those who are sick, including helping keep the vulnerable safe from disease. God wants more people to visit, not condemn, the imprisoned, all without fear that our sins will leave us victim to an angry God, one who we keep telling ourselves is just waiting to pounce on us.

Yes, the third slave in today's parable said or alleged that he 'knew' the master was harsh, but in the Greek, the word here is a knowledge that implies a perception. He perceived that the master was harsh. But when the master replies, he uses a different word, one for knowing by sight. He says, 'You knew, did you?' This wasn't how the Master was supposed to be recognized.

There is a message here about how we live with the gift of God's salvation. Namely that if we perceive only that God is harsh, waiting to punish us, then we risk not seeing God in Jesus, who died for us and our sins. That keeps us from taking the risks we need to take to love others as God first loved us.

Friends, these are indeed uncertain times, but the Kingdom of God is present with us, and we have work to do for our Lord, to share in revealing God's glory without fear. You are loved by God, who is visible in the person of Jesus, who died for you, who prays for you and who reigns in power for you.

The gift of salvation is to empower you to love, not paralyze you in fear of sin. I urge you not to perceive God as stomping around heaven waiting to punish you, but so loving, that you are counted by grace as worthy right now to hold God's Holy Spirit inside you. When we see this, and when we know this, we have a special power as believers. It's the power to turn to God. It's the power to turn away from our sin. It's the power to stop making excuses for our evil we commit or allow to happen. It's the power to start loving others as God loves us, even to the point of laying down our life for another. It is the power to wait in joyful hope, not fear, for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ on his return. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

(Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV) "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.'