

**Matthew 23:14-30**  
**1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ**  
**Sunday, November 16, 2008**

### **“Using our Opportunities”**

This Scripture (1 Thessalonians 5:1-11) passage seems to be unnerving. I believe it is meant to be unnerving. I believe it is God’s way of giving us a wake-up call, the way the ten bridesmaids with their lamps last week is also a wake-up call. God may be alerting us to change some of our ways before He sends Christ into the world so we are all ready for that Second Coming.

Fall is generally the time when most congregations face the issue of money and talk about financial pledges to the church for the coming year. We did that a couple weeks ago. Since this parable speaks about responsible stewardship, it is easy to let pledging and stewardship become intertwined and to allow those of us in the congregation to come away with the idea that making a sacrificial pledge is the important part of stewardship. This kind of idea may boost the budget a bit, but it unfortunately blackens stewardship and avoids the hard message of this parable.

This Advent parable emphasizes, in its own way, the delay of the kingdom of Christ. It is important to note that a “talent” is a rather large amount of money, about 15 to 20 years’ wages for a typical average worker at that time. It may be unfortunate it is called a talent because it tempts us to confuse it with the ordinary definition of talent and can lead to a common misinterpretation of the parable. Usually this parable is taken as an encouragement to discover what gifts and talents we have and to use them for God. If we understand it this way, the parable teaches that everyone has

a talent; some have many, others a few. Regardless of how many talents we may have, though, and whatever they may be, God wants us to use them wisely and not waste them. This is the traditional interpretation. There is nothing wrong with it.

This parable, however, is not a gentle story about what Christians do with their individual gifts and talents, as helpful as that may be. Instead, it is a disturbing story about what Christians do or do not do with the gospel as we wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven.

In the context in which the parable is found, it takes for granted the departure of Jesus and His anticipated return. When would it happen? What would it be like? What does it mean for the church? The narrator discourages guessing and instead provides the parables of Christ, which direct the listeners' attention to the issues at hand, to faithfulness, preparedness, and risk. Waiting and watching for Jesus' return really mean being good stewards of all our resources, especially the gospel. Two of the servants in this parable obviously take that calling seriously.

But what about the third servant? What is his problem? He is not a dishonest servant who is out to get whatever he can from his master. There seems to be no hint of fraud, deceit, or scandal. He seems to have no plans to embezzle the funds or to swindle his master. Neither do we have any indication that he is a philanderer or a prodigal son out having a good time.

What is wrong with being cautious? Discretion and deliberateness are virtues, not vices. But with this third servant, it seems his virtues become

vices. Prudence and being cautious easily become self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition turns to fear, and the servant ends up refusing the risk of trading in the marketplace. Even though his master expresses confidence in him, the servant judges his master to be a harsh man. He decides it is better to preserve his own safety and security than to run the risk of losing the money and angering his master.

Each servant in this parable is given money according to his ability. The talents represent opportunities to use our abilities. God assigns work and opportunity to each of us according to ability as well. We are living in the period of time between when God has given us opportunities to use and when He returns to settle accounts. It is our privilege to serve the Lord and multiply His gifts.

The three servants fall into two categories: faithful and unfaithful. The faithful servants take their talents and put them to work for their Lord. The unfaithful servant hides his talent in the dirt. Instead of using his opportunity, he buries it. He does not purposely do evil. But by doing nothing, he commits a sin and robs his Lord of service and increase.

The first two slaves are called “good and trustworthy” because they immediately set to work with the treasure entrusted to them. In Matthew’s Gospel context, this treasure is the Gospel, the teachings of Jesus; and these two good and trustworthy slaves symbolize all wise and faithful disciples who hear Jesus’ words and act on them. The third slave is called “wicked and lazy” and is the living combination of Jesus’ warning that “everyone

who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who builds his house on sand.”

The two servants who put their money to work each receive the same praise. It is not the portion but the proportion which makes the difference. They start as servants, but their Lord promotes them. They are faithful with a few things, so the Lord trusts them with many things. They work and toil, and now they enter into joy. Their faithfulness gives each of them a capacity for greater service and responsibility.

The third servant is unfaithful and is therefore not rewarded. Because this servant is afraid he might fail, he never tries to succeed. He learns about life and responsibilities. This paralyzes him with anxiety.

What we do not use for the Lord, we are in danger of losing. The Master reprimands the unfaithful, unprofitable servant, and takes his talent or opportunity away from him. The servant with the most talents is given the extra talent.

The label “talents” is unfortunate because in our language we use the word talent to refer to natural aptitudes or abilities people have. The talent in this story is a weight, and its value depends on whether the object being weighed is copper, silver, or gold. It is decidedly better to interpret the word talents as opportunities. In the parable each servant is given opportunity according to ability and is expected to serve faithfully. The servants who receive five and two talents respectively take risks. They apply themselves actively in their responsibility. But the unfaithful servant thinks only of himself and his security. He risks nothing, and achieves nothing.

This parable encourages us to love Christ's appearing, to look for Christ's appearing, and to work faithfully until Christ comes. We should be watching, witnessing, and working. We may not be successful in the eyes of others, or even popular with others. But if we are faithful and profitable for our Lord, we will receive our reward.

On the Master's return, there is an accounting from each servant. The two servants representing faithful disciples, transform privilege into action. The response of the Master carries a note of eschatological or end-of-the-world joy! The good and faithful servants enter into the joy of their Master. But as soon as the unfaithful servant opens his mouth, it is evident he is not interested in his Lord's cause but instead is interested in saving his own skin. One who cannot take action on his own, cannot take risks for the sake of his Lord! The servant is judged according to his conduct. What has been given is taken away. The story closes with the language of destruction in outer darkness which is the symbol of the anguish of ultimate separation.

The reason it is wise and trustworthy to act on the gospel is not simply because Jesus said so and disciples need to learn to be obedient and to follow orders. Living out the gospel truth of mercy, peace, and forgiveness is wise because the future belongs to God and those are the values of the future. The master will return; the promised kingdom is coming. Its Advent will make all the false values of this age obsolete. Sometimes we look back on the anger, the harshness, the indifference toward others in our past and say, "If I had only known then what I know now, I would never have done it." It is true wisdom to live out today the trust of God's future.

Today's parable is about wise and foolish disciples, those who live the gospel now and those who do not. But the parable is not only a story about the moral character of disciples but also about the moral character of God. What kind of God do we serve? Note the trembling speech of the one-talent slave. Up to this point in the story, there has been no basis whatsoever for this depiction of the master. He entrusts his slaves with vast sums of money for an extended period of time. In a culture where slaves are expected to do their duty without receiving praise, pats on the back, or plaques, surprisingly this Master gives them much praise, increased authority, and seemingly welcomes them into his home, as if they are members of his family. We are led to believe he allows them to keep the money with all profits.

Everything in this story leads us to see the master as an extraordinary man – trusting, welcoming, generous, and kind. This is how the narrator seems to present him; this is the way the first two slaves view him; and this is the way the master conducts himself. It seems obvious the third slave may have misjudged the master, distorting him into a tough, uncaring person, and foolishly acts accordingly.

The tragic news of this parable is that the one-talent slave pronounces his own judgment. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punishing. It is about living with the consequences of one's own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to God's grace in our lives and can discover the joy of God's power everywhere. But to be a child of the generous, gracious, and life-giving God and to insist on viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear-

provoking is to live a life which is sadly weakened. Indeed there is a kind of theological order at work. For those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, they find more and more of that generosity. But for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life spent under that bed alone, quivering in needless fear. “To all those who have, more will be given...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

But love demands risks – marriage, parenting, vulnerability, confrontation, tenderness. For Matthew’s readers, the main risk is not the matter of interpersonal relations, but the risk of public expression of the gospel, whether they keep it safely tucked away in a secure context or let it loose in the broader world among the nations. Anticipating Christ’s return means rejecting the lure of security, with its logic of fear and intimidation, and instead, taking the risk of discipleship, with its dangers and perils.

Interestingly, the two faithful servants do not get higher salaries or gold watches or plaques to hang on their walls. They do get two things: they get more responsibility. The reward for taking the risk and managing the investment is the burden of greater risk and the challenge of larger investments. With the responsibility comes the joy of the master’s presence. “Come on in and share my happiness,” as the Good News Bible translates it. The third servant, in turn, is punished in that he loses the responsibility of being a steward and he loses the joy of the master’s presence.

As one of the Parousia parables, or parables about the Second Coming of Christ, this is a striking lesson on our responsibility. This parable clarifies

the alternatives. To the third slave, the one choosing security over risk, the Lord remains a hard master, one who seems to reap where he does not sow and gather where he does not plant. Fearfulness breeds more fear. The prospect of joy and the freedom of response are gone. Those who risk, discover a Lord ready to share the delight of the master's presence and participate in his mission. They discover a link with the narrator of the story who knows all about risks, and whose love is neither careful nor measured. What this means to us today is simple. God gives each of us opportunities or ways to use our gifts every day. We can choose to risk using them wisely to bring God greater glory and honor and enjoy our Lord's presence in our lives and bring more joy into our own lives. Or we can choose to be like the third slave and not risk using them wisely or not risk using them at all, but bury our gifts and those opportunities to use them in the ground. By not using them, there is a greater risk. God tells us if we do not use our opportunities, God will quite simply take them away from us, cast us into the outer darkness, and not allow us to enjoy His presence in our lives. We will lose the chance to enter into God's joyousness and possibly not be given another opportunity. God presents us with new opportunities every day. What will we do with those opportunities? Will we use them wisely? That is the choice we each have. May we trust enough in God to take the risk of using our opportunities wisely so we may enjoy the presence and love of God in our lives always! Amen.