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Pentecost 27

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
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“Faithful or Fearful?”

Text: Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the interesting things about the parable Jesus told us today - the Parable of the Talents - is that the master gives out his possessions *without any instructions*. He just gives, and expects his servants to know what to do with them when he goes away. One suspects that had there been instructions, the servant who feared his master would have followed those instructions to the letter! Careful to observe every jot and tittle, each and every stipulation, for fear of retribution. But we are told of no such instructions. Only gift, given as it is - to some more and to some less - and the freedom to use that gift. To use it in faith.

And two of them do so. They rejoice in their gift and the opportunity given to them. They joyfully use their gift and happily meet the master when he returns. They don't seem concerned with whether their master expected a greater return on his investment or not - they are pleased to come to him, and seem to know that he will be pleased with them. They are faithful, not fearful, servants.

But the one is different. From the moment he receives the gift, he dreads the master's return. He sees the gift not as an opportunity but as a burden. So when the master returns, this servant is not happy, but uncertain. He is consumed with doubt, for he seems not to know his master at all, thinking him not kind and generous, but hard and unjust. He is a fearful, not a faithful, servant.

So how is it with you in your life?

That's an important question, for how it is with your life is a reflection of how it is with your faith. So it was for these servants, and so it is with us. Whether we are faithful or fearful servants will be reflected in what we do with the gifts and talents God has entrusted to us. And whether we are faithful or fearful will come from what we believe about our Father in heaven. Is He a kind, gracious, and giving God, who entrusts to us what is His own, for us to use and enjoy, and so that we can have the joy of giving back to Him from what He has given to us? Or is He a hard, harsh, and demanding God, who entrusts to us what is His own, to obligate us and demand from us? What you believe of God makes the difference between

living with confidence and joy, or living in dread, with your head (and your talent) buried in the sand.

And so Jesus tells this parable not so much to teach *us* what to do. No, Jesus tells this parable for the same reason He tells all His parables - to teach us about God; who *He* is and what *He* is doing. To teach us about the gracing and giving of our Father in heaven, so that in this time before Jesus returns, we may be children of our Father, gracing and giving and living as He has done for us. Which means that the key for all of you to be faithful servants is not for me to stand up here and tell you to be faithful and joyful. Those things, in fact, cannot be commanded - for me to do so would only produce hypocrites. Faith and joy come only when our fear is taken away; when we know our Father in heaven; when we know that He is good and kind and gracious. Then we are free to live the same.

So let us consider our Father in heaven.

In the beginning, when God created the world and all things, He entrusted them to the care of His children. He shares with them the dominion over His creation, and He shares with them His talent for creating with a man who begets and a woman who conceives children. And then there are fathers and mothers who do God's caring and nurturing for us, and communities which do God's providing and giving for Him. Not all are given them same talents or the same number of talents, but our giving God is the good giver of them all, in His wisdom and love. Love which does not treat us all the same, but each one individually and uniquely.

Now, such trusting is risky. It is much safer and shrewder to trust no one. Then you won't be disappointed when you are let down or betrayed. And that is what happened to God when His children betrayed His trust and traded His gifts and talents for sin; when they believed satan's lying words, that God ***is a hard God, reaping where He did not sow and gathering where He did not scatter.*** And the result was fear, not faith. . . . And so it is often with us who listen to satan's lying words and so turn from faith to fear. When we listen to the lie that God has given others more and so loves us less. When we listen to the lie that God does not trust us with His gifts of forgiveness and eternal life and so these things we must earn. When we listen to the lie that God is not good, but hard and demanding and unjust. When we listen to those lies, we shrink from faith, live in fear, betray His trust, and bury our heads, hearts, hands, and lives in the sands of sin and death.

But it need not be. And it need not be because though we have betrayed Him, God does not betray the betrayers, but continues to be who He is: a good and giving God. And so while there are consequences for our betrayal and sin - a world plunged into sin and death, and the shattering of our fellowship with God and with one another - God had more giving up His sleeve. The gifts of dominion and

creation He does not take back, but instead pours out another gift: His Son. His Son to be our Saviour. His Son to be the betrayed, that we betrayers might be sons again. That we see the love of the Father that went through Calvary for each of us, that our sin be forgiven, our fear banished, and we be restored to the life of faith again. That we see in Jesus' resurrection not the life of one, but the life of all, for He died for all. Without this gift, we *need* live in fear, for we are still in sin. But with this gift and the forgiveness Jesus provided in His death and resurrection, we live in faith, and know God as He truly is - our God who, as St. Paul told us today: ***"has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him."***

And so we do now live with Him, for He has given us the gift of faith, the forgiveness of our sins, and the life of His resurrection in Holy Baptism. And restored as His children to faith and life, He has given us talents to use - whether they be talents of money or ability - and the trust and freedom to use them. To use them in this time until Jesus returns, in the places He has placed us. To care and give and love and serve - not because we *have* to, but because we *get* to! Because knowing our Father through the revelation of His Son and the faith and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we know that we cannot possibly out care, out give, out love, or out serve the One who gives us all things. And so we are free to use His gifts, in confidence and joy. And living in such faith and joy now, we will be joyful when our Lord returns, knowing that He also will be pleased with us.

There is another way to live in this world and life, though - as the other servant did. A life of fear, not faith. Fear that manifests itself in so many ways in our world today. Fear that isolates people, causes greed and selfishness, and which therefore looks for joy in the possessions and power and pleasures of this world and life, which in the end, give us nothing in return. They are the true empty investment in our lives. And when the master returns, when Jesus returns, He will be met with the fear that was lived. The fear which never knew God and who He truly is. ***And the one who has not [faith], even what he has*** - here and now, what he clung to - ***will be taken away***. To a future not of eternal living, but of eternal dying.

But that is not what our Lord wants! For *anyone*. That is not why He created this world, that is not why He gives us His gifts, that is not why He sent His Son, that is not why He continues to give to us still today! He gives so that we may live, both now and forever. Now, as we wait for Jesus to return; and forever, in His rest, when He does.

And so now, we wait. We wait (as we heard last week) like those five wise virgins, filling our lamps with the oil of faith. But (as we heard this week) as we wait we are not idle, but are servants, agents, representatives, children, of our Lord. Using the gifts and talents we have been given, to give and serve and love, in confidence and

joy. With the privilege and opportunity to be sons of our Father, and brothers and sisters of our Saviour. To be like Him who has given to us - whether it much or little. And when Jesus returns, we will meet Him with the faith that we lived, and **enter into the joy** that we have already begun to receive here. The joy we enter into as we join with *the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven* already here and now in the Lord's Supper. As Jesus comes to us here and now, in His body and blood, with the gifts of forgiveness and faith that we need. That we who joyfully proclaim His death until He comes, will then joyfully enter into His life of eternal living when He does.

Until He does, as St. Paul said to us today, ***“let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.”*** That *when* He does, those wonderful words will be spoken to us as well: ***“Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master.”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to the Rev. Norman Nagel for some of the thoughts and phrases contained in this sermon. From Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel, CPH © 2004, p. 251-255)