



SAINT LUKE'S

THE 24TH AFTER PENTECOST
YEAR A

ZEPHANIAH 1:7, 12-18
PSALM 90:1-8, (9 -11), 12
1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11
MATTHEW 25:14 -30

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
NOVEMBER 12, 2017

✠ In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

About 15 years ago when everyone began getting cell phones, my parents decided that my grandmother needed one. (She thought she was just fine, thank you very much). My parents bought it for her and taught her how to use it ~ and encouraged her to take it with her to the beauty parlor and to the grocery store...or whenever she left her house. My grandmother, who hardly ever used the cell phone, always wanted the battery to be charged...so she would leave it plugged in... all the time...so much so that she unknowingly ran out the battery. One day my mother gets a call from my grandmother who was using a pay phone. My mother said to her, "What's wrong and why aren't you using your cell phone?" Granny replied, "well, it's just not working; I guess I didn't charge it long enough." Fortunately, my grandmother was only calling to get the ingredients for a recipe ~ and not something more serious. Like the servant in today's Gospel, sometimes we don't use our gifts as they are intended for us. And sometimes we think we are doing the right thing when that is the very thing that is holding us back. You'll be glad to know that my grandmother's spiritual life is very different from her dead cell phone. At 90, Granny has just completed the St Luke's Bible Challenge a month and a half early – and she's already started over!

Today's Gospel makes us grapple with some hard questions. Three servants have been given gifts of talents by their master, each according to their ability. The first one who received five talents immediately went and invested the talents and made five more. The second did the same and used

the two talents to yield back two more talents. But the third, who only had been given one talent went and hid his talent in a hole he dug in the ground.

In Biblical times, hiding your money in the ground was understood as the safest form of security. The third servant, who was clearly operating in fear, chose the seemingly safest way to protect the talent given him by his master. Now some scholars say a talent was 15 years' wages for a laborer. The exact amount is not as important as the notion that 1 talent was a great deal of wealth. I can't help but wonder if the third servant hid his talent because he had the most to lose. The other two servants could be more risky because they had more with which to invest. But the third servant only had one talent, so he chose the security of burying the talent over risking an investment.

Now to be clear, this parable is not about making money and investments. I think Jesus throughout his teaching has tried a good many metaphors and similes to try to help us better understand what the Kingdom of God is like. I think he uses money here, towards the end of Matthew's Gospel, because money is something we tend to understand. But let's not get stuck on this being about money. This parable is about being responsible with the gifts we have been given, especially in light of the fact that we, as Christians, believe that when Christ returns he will be our judge. Notice in the parable that the servants don't settle up with their master; the master comes to settle up with the servants. This is why we can't waste time. Like the first and second servants, we need to get to work immediately. Because time wasted cannot be re-claimed. When the third servant put his talent in the

ground and hid it, it became unprofitable for others and useless for himself. The real judgement on the third servant is not that he did anything wrong, but rather that he did *nothing*. Sometimes we get caught up in thinking that our Christian ethics are only concerned about not doing anything wrong, but this parable reminds us that not doing anything, that inactivity and lame excuses won't prepare us for the glory of God's Kingdom. More than anything, Jesus is telling this parable, this story, not as a threat, but as a warning. That is why this is something that deserves our attention.

Of course, if we are all honest, we worry about belong like as the third servant. (If any of you only identify with the first servant with five talents, you'll be wanting to know that I take confessions by appointment). The third Servant is operating out of fear and scarcity. Perhaps he was thinking "I don't have enough to make a real difference" or "What can I do, when these other two have so much more?" or maybe even "This is too much to handle!" Fear can be paralyzing. But if we trust God and live in obedience to God's faithful and loving purposes, we have no need to be afraid because God is our security. God, who has been our refuge from one generation to another, has proven faithful and trustworthy in every age ~ and will continue to be our refuge and strength in this world fraught with hardships.

This Parable of the Talents is where we get our English word talent, meaning gifts or abilities. It comes directly from this passage in Matthew and has been used in Latin for quite a while and in English since the 15th century. Now, if you were to ask, David Shuler or any [of our choristers] [of our choir], say, or any of the many artists, musicians, and poets gathered here today, I am

positive they have an experience of someone praising them for being talented. And then, I would also guess that they have tried to explain at some point that developing and cultivating musical and artistic gifts is about 10% talent and 90% hard work. The same is true is developing and cultivating our spiritual gifts from God. 10% talent and 90% hard work. We have to practice patience, kindness, and joy... We have practice being agents of healing...being vessels of God's grace. That's what these gifts are ultimately: they are about God's grace. They are salve and balm to hurting people. That's how we know that are from God and not of our own doing. We get nourishment and strength to cultivate them in Word and Sacraments ~ and then we can share them with a hurting world. That is faith that does not get buried in the ground!

The world around us may not share our values but that doesn't mean they don't benefit from them. We can't hide or bury our gifts just because the world doesn't want them or know how to receive them. It is in receiving them that they discover the grace that is within them. No one understands love until they themselves have been loved. No one values mercy until someone has shown them mercy. That's why we, as followers of Jesus, have a duty to share his grace and love with a hurting and broken world.

And I think this is the judgement of today's parable: In a world where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, we can't afford for us to bury our spiritual gifts of generosity and charity. Living in a political system where justice, peace, compassion, love, and tolerance are mocked as weakness and whimpy – and to be frank, a place where crypto-fascism is decorated as

patriotism, to bury our gifts is to be complicit. We can't afford to bury the gifts ~ because ultimately they don't belong to us and one day we must give an account.

1st Thessalonians reminds us "But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

A question for us is "How are you using the gifts you've been given?" Are you using them in accordance with God's faithful and loving purposes? Are you applying hard work to your natural abilities? Are you using your gifts to help others cultivate their gifts? If you ever feel stuck, start with gratitude. Gratitude opens for us new ways to see God's gifts in our lives.

God has been our refuge from one generation to another. God is our security...not some hole in the ground. God expects us to take risks for the sake of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that this broken and hurting world might know God's healing love and grace ~ and be transformed in a new way of being. Nourished and strengthened in God's Word and Sacraments we are to go out from this place today on to Hudson street, on the subway, and into this City and beyond as agents of God's grace to bear the Good News. May God give us the grace to discern the gifts we have been given. May God stir us from inertia and stir up the gifts within us that we may live our lives in accordance with God's faithful and loving purposes so that one day we too might hear

“Well done good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your master.”

✠ In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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