

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (a)
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Matthew 25:14-30
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
November 15, 2020 (Traditional)

Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man who entrusts his money to three servants before he goes on a journey. So right off the bat—if this is a picture of God here, and we know it is—what kind of God are we talking about? Why would the all-powerful God of the universe give these small creatures—these humans—responsibility over what belongs to him? Couldn't he just snap his fingers and create all the wealth he wants? Obviously, what's important to him are these small creatures themselves, and how they respond—how they act—when he gives his treasure into their hands. He wants to give his wealth over to these servants, so that they can give him his wealth back of their own free will. Now we see what's going on here: it's called love. Love is not just words or emotions: it's a total giving away of self and everything that makes up the self, in faith, without regard for consequences...without being forced to give. So God gives this beautiful world into our care. He's the source of it all. All we can do is give back to him what he has given us first. So, he has given us the freedom, and the means, to be in this continual relationship of giving and receiving with him. It's more than words, it's more than feelings. It's the total package, including everything we are and everything we have—material as well as spiritual—we receive it all as a gift and we lift it all back up to God in praise and worship.

Notice how each servant is given a different amount of gold to take care of. The master gives to “each, according to his ability.” When it comes to whatever wealth you and I have in this world, we sinners like to compare ourselves to each other. We say, “he has more knowledge than I do, she has more money than I do, but I am nicer than him, I am more compassionate than her, I'm more generous than him, I am more athletic than her, I am stronger than him, and so on.” There's no kind of wealth on earth that broken human beings won't use to one-up each other. Criminals in jail will brag to each other about the crimes they commit. As a sinful creature, who can't trust God, I'm going to use whatever spiritual or material wealth I've got to get on top all the time. To prove myself. To justify my existence. To tell myself that I deserve life, that I deserve a future. I point to the pile of wealth I've built up for myself—whatever it's made up of.

But you see, in Jesus' parable, the amount of wealth that each servant starts with and ends with, makes absolutely no difference at all to how the story turns out. The only thing that really seems to matter in the parable is that the first two servants put their different amounts of gold to *work*, and the third servant does not. Think of us, right here in this room right now: if we were to talk about the type and amount of gifts each person here has, it would be a completely mixed bag. Not all of us are athletes, not all of us are great with money, not all of us can be teachers, not all of us are smart with technology, not all of us are good with words, not all of us are good counselors or healers. This parable is telling us: it's not about the type or quantity of treasure we have compared to others. It's our relationship with God that matters, and that's going to have an effect on what we do with the talents we have. For example, if you have a gift for empathizing with other people, how are you going to pour that gift out to glorify God? If you have a gift for accumulating a lot of wealth, how are you going to pour that wealth out to glorify God? **Jesus is telling us that we don't secure our future with the material or spiritual wealth that we store up in this life. Instead, God's future shows itself in us to the extent that we fearlessly give our spiritual and material wealth away.**

More good stuff: After the first two servants double the amount of gold he gave them, the master says "well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" Is there any sense here that these servants are done with the work he's given them to do? No! In fact, both of them are rewarded with more responsibility! They're just getting started!

Jesus is revealing a truth here. We are never going to be done with our work! I know that does not sound good. But here it is: God did not create us to work to build up a stash of gold in this world so we go on a permanent vacation. That's the fairy tale we buy into. According to the fairy tale, in 10 years I'll hopefully have built up enough of a stash to enjoy my so-called "golden years." Jesus is giving me a vision of my future that's better than that sad picture of enjoying a few margaritas by the swimming pool while my body deteriorates! The work we're doing in this world—the investing we do, the receiving and the giving that we do in this life—is just a pale reflection of the massive amount of receiving and giving we're going to be doing in eternity, living in the happiness of our master. "You have been faithful in a few things now; I will put you in charge of many things." Truth is: the joy of heaven is the work we will be doing there. In heaven, we'll finally see work for what it's meant to be: perfect, constant, self-

emptying, joyful love for God and each other. What is work but giving and receiving? It's only because we're broken sinners that we don't always like it right now. But in Christ, as a believer, I know I'm headed towards a future where the work that I do and the love that I pour out and receive are going to be one and the same. And that gives me a really helpful perspective on the work that I'm doing in this broken world, day to day.

So what's the key to today's parable? What makes the first two servants different than the third, who buries his treasure in the ground? The key is *what* these three servants believe about their master. It's what they believe about the one who holds power over their lives and their future. The first two servants actually have more to lose than the third servant: they've been given more gold to take care of. So you'd think: wouldn't they be more cautious than the third servant? So why are they the ones who take the big risk, and put that gold to work?

They're not worried about the mistakes they can make with all this wealth they've been given. They're living with no fear of the master. They know who he is. They're saying, "the master has given us so **much gold!** He's got an endless supply. We're not here to bury the gold. We're here to put this wealth to work *for our good master.*"

The third servant, on the other hand, is starting from a completely different place. It all becomes clear when he explains why he buried the gold to the master: "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed." So, it's his perception of his master that makes him act the way he does. He's saying, "I've got only a little gold. I've got to protect it. I'm surrounded by a brutal world filled with loss and death. The master is merciless, just like everyone else. So how can I protect this little bit of gold I've got, to keep him from getting mad at me?" Which voice are **we** listening to, day to day?

Thank God, today we can hear God's voice in Jesus Christ calling us out of that sad life of defensiveness and self-protection and fear and comparing ourselves to others, that we all can fall into. That fear keeps us from being the people we were created to be: Human beings created in God's image. Givers. People who invest. People who love, who give generously and receive thankfully. Jesus, nailed to a cross,

shows us in full who our master is. He gives everything for us. We can wake up each morning, loving and trusting him. He's not concerned with the quantity of goodness, with whatever moral, spiritual or material wealth we store up and protect in this world. He just wants us to share in his happiness as he gives his goodness out to everyone. We can follow him, and give everything we've got in love, invest it all without fear, following his example in this world. His is the life that conquers death.

Truth is, we are going to have to give back every last bit of the wealth we have: Our treasures, our gifts, our relationships, our lives. We'll have to give it all back to the owner. None of the good stuff we have charge over in this life gives us any claim on the future he has prepared for us. The key to that future is a relationship with Jesus, here and now. Looking back on this life, from the new one, we're going to see with crystal clarity that the only thing that mattered, the whole time, was who we were serving in this life. Who is our master right now? Who are we following, day to day? When people look at us, do they see us burying our treasure in fear? Or do they see us, right here and now, reflecting our master? Do they see us reflecting the world to come, where the joyful, generous, giving and receiving never ends?