

Matthew 25.14-30 (St. Michael's – September 3, 2017)

In the Fall of 1939, the world stood on the brink of a precipice. Germany invaded Poland, and within days England, France, and Russia joined the war. It's hard to fathom, but in a short period of time, less than six years, there would be over 60 million dead, over 3% of the world's population.

In response to the war, in 1939 CS Lewis preached a sermon in Oxford where he raised the question, 'How should we live in times like these?' When there's so much chaos and uncertainty. 'What's the use, he asked, of beginning a task which we have so little chance at finishing?'

Today we might well ask the same question. Once again we're living on the brink of a precipice. The threat of nuclear war with North Korea, the menace of radical Islam, natural disasters, social unrest, and of course for our church, the Supreme Court ruling.

How do we live in such times? Do we simply hunker down and hope the storm passes over? Or do we eat, drink, and be merry, knowing there's nothing we can do, so we might as well enjoy the time we have?

Jesus, in our gospel passage, answers this question, 'How should we live?' by telling a story.

You know the parable. A rich man goes on a journey. And he entrusts three of his servants with his property in the form of talents. A talent was a monetary unit worth about 20 years wages, so a big chunk of money. Close to a million dollars today.

So one servant gets 5 talents, one gets 2 talents, one gets 1 talent. Then, after a long absence, the master returns and the servants give an account. The first two invested wisely, and

made additional talents. Whereas the third servant dug a hole and hid the money for safekeeping. When the master hears this, he praises the first two servants, but punishes the third.

The parable is fairly straightforward. Use it or lose it. But there's actually more to it than this. Note the context. In the *preceding* chapter of Matthew, Jesus is teaching about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. Wars, rumors of wars, famines, earthquakes, etc. In the passage immediately *following* our parable Jesus speaks of the last judgment and the separation of the sheep and the goats. And immediately after *this*, Jesus goes to the Last Supper, and his death.

The point is, our parable is not some quaint interlude about practical wisdom. It's not about how to speculate on the Roman stock market. But rather, it's how are you going to live when these things happen? In the midst of chaos and uncertainty and death.

And there are really two responses Jesus sets before us. Fear and Faith. Two roads we might travel.

First fear. Why does the third servant hide his talent? Verse 24, he explains himself, 'Master I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was *afraid*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.'

Essentially, he says to the master, 'I know you're tough and mean and unjust, and so I was afraid to do anything.' The servant plays the victim. He questions the master's character and *blames him* for the inactivity. In short, he has a scarcity mentality.

And this is a real temptation, isn't it? Play it safe. Don't rock the boat. Don't take risks. I know how tempting it is because this is my default. My father when bankrupt when I was growing up through some bad investing, and from that experience, I almost always err on the side of caution.

The trouble is, caution can easily slip into fear. And we can even begin to subtly doubt God's character. 'God, you *say* you're going to take care of me, but just in case I'm going to have a good 401k to fall back on.'

This fear can even sound pious. 'God doesn't need *me* to take risks. After all, He's God. He can do whatever he wants without me.' I'm reminded of the great missionary to India, William Carey. When he first shared his vision with his church in England, the elders responded, 'Sit down young man; when God chooses to save the heathen, he will do so without your help or ours.'

Yeah, it's so easy to find excuses, for not daring great things.

In contrast to fear, the second response is faith. In verse 16 we read 'AT ONCE' the two servants went out and made more talents. *At once* they venture forth. With no instructions and no assurance they'll be successful, they get to work.

Yes, these servants seem to understand that this is their calling. This is what they were created to do.

Yes, in the image of God, we are made for creative stewardship of the world. We are made to write books, compose music, build space ships, plow fields, fix plumbing, and maximize our opportunities, *even* when the times are dark.

In that 1939 sermon C.S. Lewis said this, 'We are mistaken when we compare war with "normal life." Life has never been normal. It's always lived on the edge of a precipice. Even those periods which we think most tranquil...on closer inspection, [were] full of cries, alarms, difficulties, emergencies. [And so we human beings] propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on the

scaffold, discuss the new poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb [our] hair at Thermopylae. This is not panache; it is our nature.’

Yes, it’s part of the *imago dei* to live with creative hope. And how much more for the Christian? Who knows that God’s grace is sufficient for any task.

I’m reminded of the Rev. Anthony Thompson, our guest preacher on September 24th. He tells the story of how he first came to Holy Trinity Church on Bull Street. Eight years ago he was pastoring a thriving church up in Summerville when his bishop asked him to take Holy Trinity. At the time Holy Trinity was made up of four people. You got that right. Four people. And the sanctuary was in disrepair. You could actually see the sky through the roof.

And so understandably, Rev. Thompson said to his bishop, ‘thanks, but no thanks.’ However, later he was confronted by his wife Myra, who said essentially, ‘Who do you think you are to say no.’ And in 2010 Rev. Thompson arrived at Holy Trinity.

Within a year, the sanctuary had been completely renovated at no cost to the church. Through a host of unsolicited gifts from people they barely knew, Holy Trinity came back to life. And Rev. Thompson will tell you it was all a miracle, straight from the hand of God. But in order to receive this gift, he had to step out in faith. He couldn’t just hunker down and play it safe.

A couple weeks ago I shared the story of Sir Ernest Shackleton, and his ship, the *Endurance*. When the ship was crushed by the polar ice of Antarctica, and they were trying to figure out what to do, the men could easily have given in to fear and hunkered down. But instead, they worked feverishly to prepare for their miraculous escape. Exercising the sled dogs, hunting seals, etc. They put themselves in the strongest position they could, and then hoped for a miracle.

This is one of the reasons I'm so excited about St. Michael's most recent staff hire. You know, in the face of all the legal craziness, who do we hire but a *Mission Director*, Betsy Henderson. You know, we could so easily have made excuses not to do this. There's too much uncertainty, we need to batten down the hatches.

But no, this is St. Michael's mission. This is what God has called us to do. Not playing it safe, but sharing the transforming love of Jesus Christ. In the Holy City, the Hurting Coast, and the Hungering World. Betsy is one of the most gifted and visionary people I've ever met. And so if there were ever a time to invest in the mission of this church, through tithing, through GIC funding, this is it. Today I'm going to put my full GIC pledge in the plate. Because like those sailors in Antarctica, we are going to live by faith.

A few weeks ago I met the Canadian Bishop Trevor Walters. He cared for his invalid wife for several decades before she died. And he told me something I'll never forget. He said, 'When bad things happen, don't ask why. Because you probably won't get an answer and even if you do, it won't really help.' No a better question to ask God is, 'What.' '*What are you going to do with this situation, God? How are you going to use it for good?* And then get ready for God to move.

So again, there are two ways of responding to uncertainty, fear and faith. Our passage closes with how the *master* answers his servants. And again, there are two responses, joy and judgment.

First, the judgment. 'You wicked and slothful servant' he says to the third servant. Even if I was as bad as you say I am, you should have invested my money instead of burying it in the ground. So cast this worthless servant into the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

There's really no way around these sobering words. The stakes are high. If we just talk about faith, but don't live it out, we'll have no part of the kingdom of God. In Matthew 25 there are three parables. And in each parable *someone* is excluded from the kingdom—the foolish virgins, our faithless servant, and those to the left of Jesus' throne.

And in each case, these people address Jesus as 'Lord' or 'Master.' Think about that for a second. Not everyone who addresses Jesus as Lord will go to heaven. Because faith without works is dead.

My friends, crises are always a good time for soul-searching. To ask ourselves, are we living by faith or by fear? Because sin is not only doing bad things, it's also not doing 'those things we ought to have done.' And so an essential part of confession and repentance is to acknowledge when we've failed to act. When we've been lazy or afraid. As St. Chrysostom puts it – 'it's not only the doer of evil things, but also he that doeth not good things, who is punished with extreme punishment.'

Now lest you think we're moving in the direction of works righteousness, where we earn our salvation, let's look at the master's response to his good servants. In each case, the master says, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little, I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.'

So does this master sound like he's mean and unjust? No quite the opposite. He actually sounds quite lavish and generous. Did you catch what he said, '*you've been faithful over a little, I will put you over much?*' He actually describes millions of dollars as 'a little.' Even his smallest gift is an incredible sum.

But the truth is, these immense sums *are* small compared to what else our Master has given us. As Paul writes in Romans, 'He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us

all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things.’ These talents are small, because God has ultimately given us His Son. To die for our sins and to rise for our salvation. Sheer unmerited grace.

And so we see that our story begins not with *our* work, but with the gracious initiative of God. When God calls us into his service, *before we do anything at all*, he blesses us in extravagant ways. In Christ and in the currency of His kingdom. As Paul writes in Ephesians, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.’ Our parable begins not with our work, but with God’s gracious gift.

But secondly, where does the parable end? ‘Enter in the joy of your master.’ Why does God want us to use our talents? So that we can share in his joy. It’s not because God needs a big workforce. It’s because He wants us to know the joy of doing what He made us to do – stewarding His kingdom with creativity and delight. And this can mean building space ships or it can mean washing dishes.

I’m reminded of the famous line of Eric Liddell, the gold-medal winning runner at the 1924 Paris Olympics. ‘God created me for a purpose, Liddell said, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.’ Liddell knew the joy of creative stewardship of God’s gifts.

What’s not so well known about Liddell is that after the Olympics he became a missionary to China. In 1941 when the Japanese invaded the mainland, his pregnant wife and two daughters fled the country, while he stayed behind to care for the sick. In 1943 he was captured by the Japanese and placed in an internment camp. He died there in February of 1945, five months before liberation.

This is how one of the survivors of that camp remembered Liddell. ‘Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, pouring all of himself into this effort to capture the imagination of these penned-up youths. He was overflowing with good humor, love for life, and enthusiasm.’

My friends, Jesus Christ is a generous king, who purchased our salvation with his blood. He’s then entrusted us with great gifts to further his kingdom. And He’s called us to share in his joy.

And so whether we’re building space ships or digging ditches, whether we’re winning medals or entertaining in prison camps, may we do it all with faith and courage, and for the glory of God.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.