

Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon by Rev. Edwina Landry – Trinity Lutheran Church, Herkimer – 11/15/2020

Waiting, Wonder, and Witness

Waiting is not an easy thing, especially for most Americans who want everything right away. Fast food, fast cars, fast cash, fast results. Yet, near the end Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells a series of parables about waiting, waiting for the Parousia – the end of time when Christ will come again. The early disciples – including Matthew – expected this second coming to happen soon, but they had to keep waiting. And we – Jesus' disciples now – are still waiting for that return. These parables try to help us understand how to wait. Christ's second coming is compared to a thief in the night – not knowing when he will return - and so the need to be constantly alert, constantly mindful. Jesus compares it to bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom to return by keeping their oil lamps ready. And today, we hear his coming compared to a master who goes away on a journey and before he went gave his servants an abundance of talents, just as Jesus did when he ascended to God, the Creator, and gave us an abundance of grace.

A bit of historical background - a talent – gold, copper, or silver coins weighing between 60 -90 lbs, was an enormous amount of money at that time. One talent was worth between 15 – 20 years of a person's wages. In today's currency that would be equivalent to over 2 million dollars. Can you imagine, given over 2 million dollars? And that was just the third servant's amount. The other two servants were given even more, double and even five times that amount! What would you do if that kind of money was entrusted to you? It's a huge responsibility.

The first two servants took that money and invested it and earned even more for their boss. They didn't waste a minute. They didn't know when their boss would return, but when he did, they were excited about showing him how much they had multiplied what he gave them. They thought this landowner or boss was generous and gracious because he entrusted to them all this wealth. He could have given it to someone else, but instead he gave it to them. I can just imagine them saying, "What a privilege! What a joy! What an honor to be given such an opportunity!" They couldn't wait for their boss to return. They couldn't wait to see the look on his face when they showed him all that they were able to accomplish out of gratitude. They were loving this great opportunity! What a way to live!

Meanwhile, it's understandable that the third servant didn't want to lose any of that money by investing it. What if he lost it all? What would his boss do then? I guess it depends on what kind of boss he was. According to the third servant he was a "harsh man." He was someone to be feared and so the third servant afraid of making any mistakes, buried all that treasure in the ground so nothing would happen to it. It would be safe there. So while his boss was away, the third servant went about living in fear. He was paralyzed by fear. He spent his days waiting for his boss to return in total fear dreading his return. He felt that what his boss had given him was a burden! What a way to live, or should I say, what a way not to live!

The difference in how they acted was based on their perception of the landowner, their boss. How we see things makes all the difference in the world. This reminds me of a time I went to visit my uncle many years ago. His little granddaughter was visiting and we all went to the science museum. She was so excited to see the centipede and pulled me along to see it. I didn't want to go. I think centipedes are creepy and scary. But she insisted and what I saw was no ordinary centipede. It

was a special one from Madagascar that was between 2 and 3 feet long, black and brown with a million legs and more frightening than anything I had ever seen. I wanted to run. But she kept saying, “look at it. Look at it. Isn’t it beautiful!” I couldn’t believe it!

You would have thought she saw a rainbow-colored bug with funky colored socks and cool sneakers! I saw something ugly and frightening and she saw something beautiful! How could we be looking at the same thing?

How we see things makes all the difference in the world including our image of God. Our image of God determines how we live out our lives, especially in challenging times, and in times when we have to wait without any idea of when the waiting will end. It’s easy to wait for a few minutes or for a day or two, but the longer the wait, the longer the effort. Waiting a long time can cause us to act out of fear, anger, and hurt one another if we’re not careful. How do we wait in peace? We focus on God.

But what is our image of God? Some people see God as an angry, vengeful God who causes suffering and pain and who will throw them to the darkness where there will be “wailing and gnashing of teeth.” Sickness or tragedies are seen as punishments from God. They believe that God expects perfection and there is no room for error. You either behave a certain way or God is going to get you. And so they judge others as harshly as they believe they will be judged. They see violence and war and all the evils of this world as a punishment by an angry God who will inflict the final blow on the day of judgment. They live in fear and terror just like the third servant in today’s story. For many people this is the way God has been presented to them. They have a distorted image of who God who keeps track of every mistake.

Yet, in reading the entire Bible as a whole, however, we see a different image of God who loves us with an everlasting love. We read in Psalm 103 that God is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” We read in Jer. 31:3, that God says “I have loved you with an everlasting love.” In Isaiah 43:1, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” In John 3:16 - 17 we read, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

The Scriptures are filled with images of God’s great love for us. And because of that great love, Jesus commands us to “love one another as I have loved you.” And that kind of divine love requires risk. We only have to look at Christ and see the great risk He took in saving all people to see what that kind of love requires – risk, sacrifice, and sometimes even death.

But great risk also brings new life! Yes, it may mean doing things differently than we have ever done them before, but rather than focusing on the image of losing something, what if we focused on what new things we may learn or gain? The landowner in our story risked a great deal by giving all of his wealth to his servants to manage -and they could have lost it all - but he took that chance. He trusted them with a great abundance, and out of gratitude the two servants were eager to do something with that abundance. I wonder what he would have done if they lost the money when they invested it? Would he have punished them severely as he did the third servant? We don’t have the answer to that in our story, but his character seems to point to the fact that he was more concerned with taking risks based on love, than letting fear run their lives. He was more concerned with them living in gratitude for the grace that was bestowed on them rather than living out of fear.

How do we live our lives as we wait? Do we fear Christ's return like the third slave, or do we eagerly await His return like the other two servants, diligently taking risks and living out of love and gratitude for all we have been given? These parables from Jesus tell us not to play it safe and bury our talents, but to help grow the kingdom of God here on earth by taking holy risks based on compassion and love. They urge us to take the time listen to each other, and to spread love and harmony and peace knowing that we only have so much time.

Jesus commands us to see others through God's eyes. And that requires great risk at times. It takes great risk to be vulnerable enough to ask for forgiveness, because what if that person rejects us? It takes great risk to forgive because what if that person never repents or changes? But perhaps we may be changed in the process. It takes great risk to stand up and fight against injustice when other louder voices are telling us to be silent, but we are called by Jesus to care for our neighbor. It takes great risk to care for the poor, the oppressed, the outsiders, the marginalized, the persons who look and act differently than us, because we may be seen as hopeless idealists or bleeding hearts. But Jesus said whatever you do to the least of these you do to me.

We are the instruments of peace that God works through to enact change in this world. It takes great risk to pray for God's will be done and not ours because we may not like the results. But does our image of God really believe that God – our Creator - does not have our best interests in mind? Faith takes great risk, but it's worth the risk, because we have the assurance of God's faithfulness through Christ. We as Jesus' followers can't act out of fear, but must respond out of faith. There's too much fear around us, too much division, and we as the Church can model real unity in diversity by risking to love as God loves us. The greatest risk of all is playing it safe, and

that's not the example Jesus modeled for us. Jesus showed us a different image of God – one of love, and compassion, and mercy and justice for all people.

We all wait for a great many things, yet we aren't called to wait in fear or hatred, but in wonder and witness. When we do this waiting becomes a holy practice, a holy journey. We have been given grace upon grace, and we can look around and see the image of God everywhere – creation, each other, and even in the face of those who may at first seem different or scary. We are all God's beloved children and while we wait for Christ's return, we can wait by witnessing to the wonderful love and grace of God. When we shine our light, rather than burying it – when we take holy risks, we help to bring about God's kingdom here on earth, God's beloved community.

I'd like to end with a saying from Marianne Williamson – also quoted by Nelson Mandela who knew a lot about taking risks- that I think speaks to our gospel today. It's entitled Our Greatest Fear.

Our Greatest Fear

“It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,
Our presence automatically liberates others.”

We were indeed born to make manifest the glory of God that is within each one of us – in all our glorious differences and diversities. Imagine what we could do to help bring about the kingdom of God here on earth if we all lived out of that image! Amen!