

“The Darkness Deepens”
Pentecost 22a Proper 28
Matthew 25:14-30

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In Jesus' Name.

The first reading concluded, “...in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.” “Thanks be to God,” you said in response to the reading. Did you really mean that? In the psalm we sang, “we are consumed by your anger and we are afraid because of your wrath.” That doesn’t sound like anything to sing about. A bit of light crept in with the second reading but by the end of the Gospel we are back to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The darkness deepens, it seems to me, as we draw closer to the end of the church year and as the gospel readings come closer to the cross. The readings match the season outside. The darkness deepens. In a recent conversation a young man told me, “I think we enjoy summer more in Chicago because of the winter. Winter gives context,” he said. Well, I’m already tired of the context. Or maybe I’m afraid of it. The deepening darkness and the smell of decay as leaves rot in the gutters face me with my worst of fears.

So, it is a good time for a story. One person said of parables: In every one of them there is extravagance, something that spills over the top providing the clue to understanding.¹ Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.... The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.” The kingdom of heaven is like that, valuable beyond all else.

¹ Attributed to Paul Ricouer by Thomas G Long in his lectures on Matthew at the Professional Leaders’ Conference of the Florida-Bahamas Synod ELCA, September 24-26, 2001.

The extravagance in today's parable is the talent. The talent in question is not the ability to play the violin, your math skills, or your performance on the baseball diamond. The talent was a unit of money, the largest amount known at that time. A talent was the equivalent of 15 years salary for the average worker.

Jesus already has taught us the most valuable thing is the kingdom of God. The extravagance is the gospel, the good news that the kingdom of God is at hand in Jesus. Jesus is the master in the parable who is going on the journey. The journey he undertakes is to the cross and grave, resurrection and ascension to the right hand of his Father. In former parables Jesus taught us disciples what the kingdom of God is like. In the parables of Matthew 25 Jesus teaches us how to wait for his return. The further extravagance in the parable is that the master entrusted his property to his slaves. Jesus entrusts the gospel treasure to us. He already told us what to do with it way back in chapter 5. We hear it again whenever we have a baptism. "You are the light of the world," Jesus said. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

Two of the slaves did just that. They took the gospel treasure out into the world and spread it around. They let the gospel light shine and it multiplied. The third slave took his treasure and buried it in the back yard where no one would find it. He is like one who would hide his light under a bushel basket. When the master returned and asked him why he did that, he responded, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid..."

Is there anything in this parable so far that gives any indication the master is harsh. On the contrary he seems incredibly generous. He placed great wealth in their hands. As I read the parable it seems to me the first two get to keep the treasure and are promised more. Plus the master invited them in saying, "Enter in the joy of your master." The slaves are invited into the family and given a seat at the banquet table.

The third slave distrusted the master. Worse than that he thinks the master is evil. One could argue that with such an attitude this slave has excluded himself from the joy of the master. One could argue that if we bury the gospel, keep it hidden, and don't show it the light of day in our daily lives then we are choosing to walk in the darkness. One could argue that with such lack of trust in God, a disciple of Jesus is a disciple no longer, has chosen for him or herself the outer darkness. That argument can also be a way to avoid hearing words of condemnation from Jesus our master. In the parable the master's judgment is harsh. What the one-talented slave has is taken away and given to the one who already has ten times that amount. The slave with the shovel is thrown into the outer darkness. Let's see him dig his way out of that. It is impossible to hear the words of the master in the parable and not hear God's word spoken by the prophet Zephaniah and set to music by the psalmist. If we hide the gospel light under a bushel basket, bury it away from any intersection with our daily lives God says, "The day of the Lord will be a day of darkness and gloom.... I will search Jerusalem with lamps; I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs. Those who say in their hearts, 'The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm' will find out otherwise."

I want to nudge these words of judgment close to us, because it is only when we realize our problem is actually with God that we will look to God for the solution.

Listen to the way John proclaims God's solution. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.... And the Word became flesh and lived among us." Jesus is the light of God shining in our darkness. This light was buried in the grave but the grave could not extinguish this light. Jesus breached hell's walls and carried God's light into the domain of the Evil One. Jesus rose from the grave, the first born of God's extravagant new creation.

Such abundant provision from God literally crosses out our mistrust and creates faith in our hearts. We bank on God's extravagance. For the times in each day we are fearful or angry or feel worthless I suggest we feel the mark on our foreheads, the cross etched there at our baptism to remind us who we are and whose we are.

And then we dig up the gospel treasure, take it out into the world, and see it multiply. Last Sunday evening I attended an event celebrating the 15th anniversary of an organization called Protestants for the Common Good. Think about that name for a moment. What's the alternative: Protestants Against the Common Good? Speaker after speaker talked about working on behalf of God's beloved community, extending it, creating it. In their program booklet they cited 15 years worth of examples: welfare reform efforts, civil rights rally, justice coalition for greater Chicago, Ethics reform, predatory lending reform, predatory accountability act, ex-offender opportunities, temporary assistance for needy families, payday loan reform, Illinois safe children act; and the list goes on. We can look in our congregation's benevolence and social ministry handbook for our own examples. We pray for one of them today, the Oak Park and River Forest Food pantry. At the end of the program last Sunday night, one earnest young staff

member of Protestants for the Common Good brought the evening to a close saying, “I am committed to our efforts on behalf of the beloved community. We are not there yet, but we are well on our way.” I thought to myself, “How naïve can you be? Every hungry person you feed will be replaced by two more. Every reform enacted in Springfield or Washington will be overshadowed by four more acts of greed and indifference to the common good.” With that cynicism I dug a hole and buried the gospel treasure.

Dig it up. In the parable Jesus teaches us how to wait. Dig up that gospel treasure and get busy giving witness to the beloved community that our master will bring to its fullness upon his return. And he will welcome us into his joy.