

“Gratitude’s Response”

Matthew 25: 14 – 30

Thanksgiving Sunday

November 19, 2017

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Between this Sunday and last, this room and hopefully our hearts have been filled with the music of thanksgiving! From our hymn sing with the theme of gratitude last week to this Sunday’s Thanksgiving Sunday, we have been singing out our thanks and praise to God our Rock and our Redeemer! “Let all things now living a song of thanksgiving to God our Creator triumphantly raise!”

We have so much for which to be thankful. And life is just so busy, so full and oftentimes so overwhelming not just with the good but with the very painful and hard stuff that we forget that very faith fact – that we have so much for which to be thankful.

I picked up one of my favorite books this week by one of my favorite contemporary theologians. The book is ‘Help, Thanks, Wow: the 3 essential prayers’, authored by Anne Lamott. For her words on her prayer ‘Thanks’, she writes, “A lot of us religious types go around saying thank you to God when we find a good parking space, or locate the house keys or the wandering phone or finally get a good night’s sleep.” So true! And we know that our gratitude runs deeper; we say thank you for that day last week of sunshine when the skies were so blue, and the leaves were so golden and red, and we say thank you for those few moments that we were able to step out of whatever we were engrossed in to notice it. Our gratitude runs deep; for family and friends in our lives now and those saints who have gone before us, even though opening up that place where memories of loved ones no longer here can be painful, in between the wiping of tears or catch of breath we whisper our thanks. For food and shelter, for the poetry that helps us express our thanks, for the arts, and even for those times in our lives when we mess up but are able to learn from them and grow. Oh, how we have so much for which to be thankful.

And as a people of faith, we are reminded that this is just the outer layer. If we were to draw our gratitude in a diagram, we would maybe have all of that which was just mentioned in the outer circle and then in the center, in the very core of our thanksgiving would be a God who says we are enough, we are forgiven, we are loved. How can we even begin to express our gratitude for a faith in a God that is love over hate, light over darkness, goodness over evil?

How do we respond? How do we possibly respond? Or another way of asking the question, “How does the creature say ‘thanks?’”

One of the hymns from last Sunday’s gratitude hymn sing asks this very question. “God of the sparrow, God of the whale, God of swirling stars, God of rainbow, cross and empty grave, how does the creature say grace, how does the creature say thanks? What is gratitude’s response?”

Today’s scripture reading is not a familiar Thanksgiving text. It’s pulled out more often during the times of church stewardship campaigns and for good reason. But take another look at it with

me and you may hear what I did this week, you may hear it as an answer to that very question, 'How does the creature say thanks?' How do we respond?

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability. The first two go and invest the sums given. The third buries the amount given in the ground to save it for his master. The master returns, rewards the first two for making money on their investment and punishes the third for being foolish. And then that final sentence that screams foul (!) "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." A biblical version of 'for the rich will get richer and the poor will get poorer' and how fair is that?? Well, it wouldn't be, if this parable were about money. But it's not.

It's not about money even though a 'talent' is a huge sum money. The 'talent' referred to here equals 6,000 denarii, earnings of a day laborer for 20 years. With this in mind, we can figure that the first servant/slave was given a sum equal to 100 years of labor, the second a sum equal to forty years, the third, although smaller – still nothing to complain about – a sum equal to 20 years of labor. An exaggerated amount, an extravagant amount, an amount so extravagant that we pause and wonder, 'is there something else going on here'?

We have a second hint that yes, there IS something else. The first two go and invest the money. The third digs a hole in the ground to safeguard the money. In today's world, that would be the equivalent of hiding our cash under our mattress instead of putting it in the bank. Utterly foolish. Ridiculous. Yet in the Biblical time of this story, burying one's money was not only socially acceptable, it was what many people did – those lucky ones that did have extra. But in our parable, the third slave gets punished for doing what many would normally do with a large pile of money. Why? Again, because this isn't a parable about money.

The parable in Matthew is third in a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven, and more specifically, what to do in the between time. Those early followers of Jesus had thought that the Christ would be returning soon and very soon. But then a couple of years passed. Then a couple more. Then a couple of decades, then a couple more. And the gospel writer Matthew addressed a major concern of the early believers years after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Not only when would he return but how to wait; what constitutes proper conduct while waiting for the return. Matthew chapter 25 begins, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this...." and we read the parable of the bridesmaids supposed to be tending their oil lamps while waiting for the bridegroom, they fall asleep and miss him, ending with the phrase 'Keep awake, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.'

The very next sentence begins today's parable.... For it is like a man going on a journey and entrusted his slaves with his riches....and when the man returns, he calls them to him and asks, 'so what did you do with what I gave you?'

On the surface, we read a lesson about investment banking. But the deeper level of truth with a capital 't' is the lesson about how we invest our lives with the abundance of love that is given to

us by ‘the master’... or returning to our hymn from last week, “How does the creature say grace, how does the creature say ‘thanks’?”

During this season of thanks, may we think of ‘talents’ in the story as the abundance and beauty of all of life that is given to us; how are we to respond? How do we express our gratitude? The Interpretations series scripture commentary states that the love we have received by ‘the master’, God, and for which we are so very grateful, is to be invested in faithful and untiring service to other people.’ (p. 288) The first two slaves that were rewarded in the end stepped out with the what was entrusted to them, invested it or themselves, one might say fully lived, investing their lives as much as they were able and oh my the more they loved the more love they received.

And the poor third slave, cast into outer darkness. He wasn’t given as much as the others but still, such an abundance, and he chose to let his fear of what might happen take over, not wanting to step out in risk, not realizing that love and faith, like money, require the taking of risks in order to grow. And the greatest risk here was to not risk anything; not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply. His ‘sin’ was sloth; not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living. Theologian Dietrich Bonhofffer wrote, ‘not living passionately for something is akin to living in the outer darkness, is akin to the death of the soul.’

Or, from poet, writer, William Arthur Ward, “Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.”

Our parable reminds us how to be in this between time that we call our life. The phrase that was popular a few years ago still holds true, that really our lives are to be about ‘living thanks, not just giving thanks’. Or, as John F. Kennedy once said, “As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”

‘For those who have, more will be given’ – For those who are able to pause at the end of the day and ‘count their non material blessings’, to just spend some time in reflection, and to maybe even utter a prayer of thanks, that awareness will grow their gratitude, able to see and whisper thank you for even more...oh yes, the more you have the sense of gratitude, the more your life will be shaped by gratitude and the more that one allows that gratitude to shape how they live, sharing and caring, the more they will receive and then yes, we can make sense of that once troubling statement, ‘For those who have, more will be given.’

How does the creature say ‘thanks’? It’s about how we invest our lives, taking all that God has given us, all of the forgiveness...and forgiving others, all of the unconditional love...and loving others, the radical welcome that we receive from the One who says, come to this table, for you are always welcome... and we welcome others.