

Sermon Nov 15 2020

Grace Mercy and Peace from God our father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A while ago, my son Sam thought it would be clever to take the app I use on my phone for driving directions, and change the voice that talks me through the app. At first, when I started using the app, I enjoyed a pleasant woman's voice that Johann and I jokingly referred to as "wife number 2", while on her version of the app on her phone, she chose the man with the pleasant British accent, who we referred to as husband number 2, or sometimes "Mister Butler".

When Sam got a hold of my phone one day, he switched the voice on the app to Batman. So now, when the app starts up, Batman tells me in an energetic, gravelly voice to buckle up for another day navigating the forces of good and evil. When there is a hazard, Batman tells me, "hazard ahead, reminds me of Gotham city." When it wants to warn me of police ahead, he tells me, "watch out for Commissioner Gordon, reported ahead." And when I should prepare for upcoming turns in my route, he says, "Turn right, and then turn left, and then, BE READY".

That's what our Lessons from scripture today are telling us: BE READY!

And it seems fitting enough, especially given our present challenges and stress points.

We continue to exist in a political holding pattern, as the president fights on to see if he can win a second term, while much of the rest of the world wonders if and when he will accept the results of the national election. Surely, we all feel the anxiety caused by this situation. We may feel even more anxious about the future, since it is so clear that we are a nation divided in the way we see reality. Regardless of who the president is come January 20th, we will need to be ready, be alert, and be prepared to act with the care and confidence that comes from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We are also facing increasing anxiety about the Covid 19 Pandemic. Not only is it not going away, but it is spreading, practically in all parts of the country. Even though there are positive developments on the vaccine front, it remains to be

seen how the second wave will impact our corporate life together. We have to be ready.

Given this background situation, we find that we are all dealing with stress and anxiety. When we add to this the burden of worrying about our jobs, raising a family, helping our kids with school, or having to move, or dealing with severe illness, we may feel maxed out, as if we can carry no more burdens in our wagons. Given the energy that we are using up just coping, we worry that we might have nothing extra to give, nothing in reserve. We may feel that hope is eluding us. Nevertheless, we are being called to be ready.

So we bring these burdens and anxiety to church with us this morning, looking to scripture, and to the means of grace that our Lord uses to minister to us, to help us, and to sustain us. We hear the call to be ready, and we ask God to help us to do that faithfully.

The Gospel lesson today is really about being ready for when God shows up. The parable of Jesus speaks of a business tycoon who leaves his wealth in the hands of three trusted servants. A talent in the bible represents the value of about 8 years of wages for a laborer. So the amount he leaves with these 3 servants is substantial.

With one he leaves 5, with another 2, and with a third, he leaves one. The first two take the money and invest it in the market, somehow employing the money in such a way that they make more money. The third servant buries the money in the ground. When the businessman returns home, he demands to see his money. The first two servants produce double the amount they were given, but the third produces only what he was originally given. The master is pleased with the first two, and deeply disappointed with the third, and throws him out.

The most typical way to interpret the parable is to look at the master as a stand-in for God. The parable is then interpreted either literally, as an affirmation of God entrusting all of us with the blessings of wealth and resources which we are called on to invest wisely. Or it can be interpreted figuratively, where the resources we are given by the master represent our spiritual resources of faith, hope and love, which we are to invest in the world around us. Those who are stingy or lack courage, in either interpretation, are rejected by God in the end.

Another way to interpret the parable is to see the master as Jesus, calling his disciples to greater investment in their ministries.

Others are interpreting the parable more simply as a judgment on the values of thrift and enterprise by which the world seems to run, and which fail to support fairly all workers in the marketplace, but especially those lower down the food chain. In this case, it is a warning about buying into the worldly values of the market, that the kingdom of God is different than the kingdom of this world.

But the parable must be carefully situated in the context of these last few chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. We need to take into consideration what we believe Matthew was trying to say to his church when he crafted his version of Jesus' ministry. Matthew's historical context was the period of time in the last quarter of the century, about 40 to 50 years after Jesus's death and resurrection. The temple in Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the Roman army. Jews were being forcibly displaced from Palestine into other areas of the empire. The new Christian church was struggling with persecution from without, and fighting and disagreement from within. There was turmoil everywhere.

In this context, imagery from earlier traditions in the Hebrew bible, such as apocalyptic imagery, and teachings and warnings about the end of the world, were rampant. As one commentator puts it, "This kind of language welled up irrepressibly in the first century, as Jews and Christians alike felt the earth and its old eternal rocks shifting and melting beneath their feet." Matthew's Gospel expresses these same instincts, and in the 24th and 25th chapters, this focus on the end times comes to the fore. Matthew uses the stories and parables in these two chapters to teach Jesus' perspective on the signs that might warn those who are alert and paying attention, as well as speculation on when the end might happen.

Today's parable comes in that section of Chapter 25 where the question of "when" is paramount. Jesus uses the parable of the bridesmaids that we read last Sunday, and the parable of the talents of today's lesson, to warn his followers that the time is not set, but when it does come, it will come upon us suddenly. Thus 5 bridesmaids who are not prepared with extra oil, fall out of favor with the groom. And in this parable today, the third servant who buried the money he was given is not ready for the reckoning when his master suddenly reappears.

We also know from biblical scholars that Matthew is concerned to emphasize the burden of responsibility for leaders in the church, who are called to be faithful to the work of the Gospel, and who are called to be ready for when the Lord shows up. Using these two emphases in our reading of the text, we see that first, the meaning of the story of a ravenous business tycoon who banishes a timid servant is not using the parable to say anything about the legitimacy of small venture capitalism, or God's disappointment with our lack of investment, but simply that, from our experience already, we can understand how unprepared and empty-handed we would feel if we had a master like that as a boss, and yet acted as the third servant did. The master's arrival would be jarring, even panic inducing, to us. So be ready.

But now we also know of Matthew's unique emphasis in the context of the turmoil in the church of his day, where leadership is needed more than ever. Matthew is trying to warn the leaders of his church about their responsibility with the talents that have been given to them. Leaders in the church haven't been given a cushy job, but one that has a sense of urgency to it. That urgency has to do with the fact that the church expects Jesus' return, and we can sense how badly it will reflect on us when he returns, if the important resources of the church have been squandered or left idle in the meantime.

Thus this warning is for Pastors most, and bishops, but also congregational elders, our church councils, and other leaders in the churches. We are the ones who have been given responsibility for the keys of the church, the power to help mold our fellow Christians to see the grace and ministry of the Gospel aright. And the leaders of the church fail if we underprepare for, under invest in, or somehow obscure the truth of Jesus' presence in the church itself, and also in the world around us.

I could continue to widen the scope of this charge, to include all the faithful in any church, who are called to the same work with the same sense of urgency, but maybe this week, it is enough to remind the leadership, the council members, the elders, the bishops, and pastors like myself, that in the face of the great turbulence in the world around us, and in the shadow of the coming kingdom of God, which will appear when we least expect it, and which will judge the world we live in, we are called to "be ready."

Christians are those people, called on in everyday life to live like the master is coming home at any moment, and probably soon! Yes, there should be some nervous discomfort at this reality. We should be piqued, prodded to cope up to the situation at hand, rise to the occasion and relight our lamps. Take our buried courage and step out boldly in the light of the Gospel.

But as Christians who have by the Grace of God, come into contact with the King of love, the master of compassion, and the firstborn from the dead, we also know and expect his full knowledge of our failures, his full understanding of our fears, and his full mercy and forgiveness for our failings. For we know that God is also not like the terrible master in the parable at all. God doesn't play by the rules of the jungle. God owns the jungle. The dog eat dog world around us, and which we are stuck in too for our own living and working, that world is the world our Lord laid his life on the line for. He has given his life for ours, and the reward for preparation, for being ready, is the joy at his coming. Please Lord Jesus, quickly come, come to us today, in the words of your church, and the meal of grace that you have given us, but also come quickly and soon, to help our timid hearts, and lead us boldly into the freedom that comes from knowing your steadfast and everlasting love. Amen.