

Sermon – November 15, 2020  
“Enter into the joy of your master”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 25:14-30

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen*

Good morning everyone! It is great to gather this morning and to be joined by those who are on the live stream. Let's celebrate a few items this morning that have occurred in our congregation this past week. We had the opportunity to celebrate Veterans Day and I would like to again thank all veterans for your service. We had another opportunity to come together and study John's Gospel at Afton and were blessed with John's introduction of Jesus as the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for our sins. At Fairfields, we spent some time looking at David's encounter with Goliath and David's trust in God, even in the face of a giant. The Good News Club had additional children attend. Thank you for your prayers, and I ask that you keep praying that children will join and hear the Good News. We completed our District Conference Saturday morning via Zoom and are ready to move forward as a District into the coming year. Let's give God some praise for what He has allowed us to experience this past week.

Let me give some background before we look into today's scripture. Let's start by defining a talent, as understanding that idea is key to grasping what Jesus is teaching in this parable. A first century talent is a measure of metal. The amount of metal here is a very large amount. The master gives out almost two million dollars of metal as he distributes the talents to his slaves. While that amount of precious metal seems large to us today, we need to keep in mind that in the first century that amount of wealth would represent an even greater gift. One of the issues with our understanding this parable and what a talent was, is that in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, in the English language, the word "talent" became a word used to describe gifts and abilities we have as people. That definition grew out of this parable and the result is we think of the use of talent in the parable by Jesus as telling us to use our talent (our gifts and abilities) for the kingdom of God. Doing so is not a bad thing, but if we are not careful, we will miss Jesus' focus on the large gifts of wealth the slaves are given to use. A talent has become gifts and abilities we have and

not something we are given in abundance. Our challenge, as we hear this parable, is to set aside the idea of using our gifts and abilities given by God and to seek to encounter why Jesus tells this parable and why Matthew includes it in his Gospel. We will need to work to think about a talent as a large gift from the master with which we are to work and not focus on the limited abilities we have that fade with time. Yes, we are to be using the talents, the gifts and abilities we have been given, for the kingdom of God. But we need to identify the talent or talents given to us by the master that we are to be using in the kingdom. So, a question we need to answer is, “What is the talent we have been given that connects to this large gift of wealth given by the master?”

As we hear this parable, we also need to be mindful of the concept of a slave. This is not slavery where people are imported to serve others in difficult manual labor. Instead, slaves were those who were bound to the master and were managers of his property. The slaves have been prepared by the master for the tasks of managing his property. We should also note that even as the slaves are successful with their management of the master’s property and are invited into the joy of their master, they remain slaves, those bound to a master.

Another aspect of the parable we see is the slave who hides his talent in the ground. We should understand that in the first century, banks were very different from the secure, insured institutions of today. In the first century, banks were very risky places for funds. They were more akin to risk-laden investment opportunities with a few people than secure, interest-generating institutions of today. Hiding one’s wealth in the ground in the first century was an acceptable and more secure practice for keeping one’s wealth safe.

With that background, we are ready to move into the parable which is easily broken into three movements. The first movement is the distribution of wealth to the slaves. The first servant is given five talents, the second two, and the last one. Each of them is given a number of talents in proportion to their capabilities as understood by their master. Then the master leaves them on their own to work with the talents they have received and goes away for a long time.

The second movement is the actions of the slaves. The first slave immediately takes the five talents and gets to work trading to generate additional wealth. He is successful in generating five more talents. The second slave, like the first, immediately gets to work as well and trades with his gift of wealth making two more talents. And finally, the slave with one talent takes what he has been given, digs a hole, and hides his talent in the ground. This slave does not put what he has been given to work at all, but simply keeps it secure until the return of the master.

After a long absence in which the slaves are left alone to work with their talents comes the third movement. The master returns and summons the slaves to settle accounts with him. The first slave reports that he has made five more talents with the five he was given. The master's response is, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." The master is pleased with the work this slave has been doing and puts him in charge of many additional things. The slave is also invited to enter in the joy of his master. This is not retirement following a job well done but being given more responsibility and more to do with the master. He is invited to cooperate with the master and to enter into the joy of such a relationship. The slave is still a slave, but his relationship to the master is now changed to one where joy is shared.

The second slave is summoned and shares that he has earned two talents with the two talents he was given. The response from the master is the same for this slave's work even though his yield is much less. This slave is also told, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Like the first slave, he is given more to do for the master and his relationship also changes allowing him also to share in his master's joy. This doubling of the positive response from the master tells us that the focus of the parable is on those who are meeting the expectations of the master, those who have used the talents they were given to bring an increase to their master's property. Let me also emphasize that this is not a retirement ceremony for these two slaves. They are each promised more work in this new relationship with their master. We should also note that it is not the amount the slave has produced, but that the slaves have increased what they were given that is the master's focus. The master gives them each the same reward.

Now we come to the third slave. He comes forward with a talent, the talent he was given. He has returned what he was given to his master, having kept it safe and secure. Perhaps he overheard the success of the other slaves or was aware of how they were working and growing their talents. When his turn comes, he explains his actions by saying, "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, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." The slave is claiming that he is afraid of the master because of the master's actions the slave claims to

be aware of, that of being harsh and taking that which he did not sow or plant. These are strong negative words from a slave to a master. The master's reply is also to the point. He calls this slave "wicked and lazy." He uses the slave's words against him to point out that the slave has not done even minimal work with the gift he was given, then takes away the gift and gives it to the one with ten talents, and has the lazy and wicked slave thrown into the outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. This does not sound like a place any would like to be found, and it is a place that is very different from the cooperative, joyous relationship the other slaves now enjoy with their master. Yet, we should be mindful that this slave did return to the master what he was given. Why does the master react so harshly with this slave's lack of work while he was absent? I think we should also notice that the slaves who did work and produced return could only improve their situation by the amount that was given to them. The first could only produce five more talents with the five he was given and the second could only produce two additional talents with the two talents he was given. Neither of those who went immediately to work produced more than what they were given. Neither of those the master rewarded produced a ten times growth in the gift they were given. But their work is rewarded while the slave who returned what he was given is punished and separated from the master. At this point, Jesus ends the parable and we are left wondering several things such as, "Why does Jesus tell this parable?" and "What is the action of the slaves the master rewards?" and "What does this parable teach for us today?"

From a church history view, the allegorical interpretation that is most used for this parable is that the master going off on a journey is Christ ascending to heaven. His return is the second coming of Christ. The rewards and punishments are what will be given to the saved and unsaved. While that view has merit, I think there is more that we should catch from this parable. Keep in mind that Jesus is teaching this to his disciples as he prepares them for his exit. What the talents represent in kingdom living is not as important as for all disciples to live and work in a manner so that when we are giving account to our returning master, we will hear the reply, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave" As with the parable of the ten virgins, the five who are prepared enter into the wedding banquet. Here those who are at work living as those in the kingdom are to live are those who the master commends and welcomes into his joy. As we look at this parable, we cannot avoid finding in Jesus' teaching judgment for those who seek to live lives that are not fulfilling God's expectation for those who are part of the kingdom. To fail to

see the judgement aspect is to overlook a key aspect of the parable. Jesus teaches that there is judgement for those who choose not to live consistent with the Master's expectations. Our response to this teaching is to not judge others, but to help them understand kingdom living, warn them about the consequences for not living in this manner, and help them to consider living in a manner that honors God. We are not to try to describe to them the outcome of residing in outer darkness, but to lovingly point them to the kingdom and kingdom life. Just as the one talent servant did not have a true understanding of his master and instead allowed his misconceptions to produce fear, to alienate him from the master and then to become slothful in meeting expectations, so also those who do not know the steadfast love of God have a misunderstanding of God and allow that misunderstanding to separate them from God. We are to be those with utmost compassion for those who are separated from God. Our desire should always be to help them encounter God's love. One of the things this parable teaches is that those with a correct understanding of God will be working diligently to invest our lives in a productive manner for the kingdom of God.

We need to spend just a few moments and see if we can identify what the first century concept of talents might have been and then connect that idea to what a talent might be for us today. There is nothing incorrect about taking the concept of a talent as our gifts and abilities in life and seeking to put them to work in the kingdom of God, but that idea disregards the large amount of wealth that a talent represented in the first century. We need another commodity that more closely represents the size of this gift, as, for the majority of us, especially this pastor, our gifts and talents are limited and fading. So, we are left trying to identify what God extends to each of us as our capability that we can use up to that limit of the gift given.

My current explanation for the talent is connected to John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in him might have eternal life." The talent I think we are given is God's love, God's steadfast love. We receive steadfast love in the salvation gift we were given through Jesus' death on the cross for forgiveness of our sins, but the love God gives us does not end at salvation, continuing on through sanctification and for all eternity. God's love is poured out on us as we are able or capable to receive this gift. Steadfast love is extravagant, overflowing, never-ending love, given without measure, and we are to be at work giving it away to others. We cannot love more than God loves us. And the core of our living for the kingdom is to love God and to love others. We are to get to work

immediately loving others and through that love draw them into the kingdom of God. JD Walt this week in one of his devotions called drawing through loving “magnetic mercy.” This is the love given to others that then grows in them and becomes a new talent of love. This is the second half of the Gospel, our response of loving others as God loves us. This is our job in the kingdom of God. Several questions come to my mind about this such as, “What does this look like?” followed by, “Are we at work in our lives for the kingdom of God?” and “Are we working in a manner that when Christ returns, we will be told, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave”? I will give you a spoiler alert this morning. The next parable we are going to look at takes this idea of kingdom living and gives us concrete ideas for putting this talent to work as we are expected to be doing. Jesus does not leave us seeking to love, but seeks to teach us how to be kingdom people.

As we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead us into new expressions of love for others, as we allow the Spirit to convict us of places where we are not being loving and then repent of our failures, earnestly seeking to be those who are receiving the talent of steadfast love and immediately trading that love to make additional talents, we become those who are at work in the kingdom of God. This is not just loving those we like and get along with. We are to love our enemies. Those we disagree with and those who are seeking to harm us are all those we are to love as Jesus loves us. In this parable, there are two examples of those who took what was given to them and immediately went to work with it to produce more. This is what it looks like to be at work as kingdom people. We are to be loving others with the love which God has filled us with, and we are to be always seeking to let God change us to be capable of being filled with greater amounts of steadfast love. Our goal, our striving as kingdom people, is to hear the words from our master, Jesus Christ, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave, enter into the joy of your master.” This is the reason Jesus teaches this parable, that we might learn to be those found at work bringing the yield of our talents to the master and being rewarded with entry into the joy of the Lord.

*Pray with me: Lord, open us to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that we might be given new talents of steadfast love and seek to put them to work right here, right now. Jesus, teach us to love as you love us. Give us hearts open to receiving talents of steadfast love and using them to love others. Give us courage to go and love each other. Amen.*