

Proper 28 A Sermon  
Matthew 25:14-30  
November 19, 2023

*“Worth the Wait?”*  
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<sup>14</sup>“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.<sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with

*interest.<sup>28</sup> So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.<sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’*

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A preacher of the “old school” was describing the events of Judgement Day and, of course, he used Biblical phraseology whenever he could.

“Oh, my friends,” he intoned, “imagine the suffering of the sinners as they find themselves cast into the outer darkness, removed from the presence of the Lord and given to eternal flames. My friends, at such a time there will be weeping, wailing and a great gnashing of teeth!”

At this point, one of the elders of the congregation interrupted to say, “But Reverend, what if one of those hopeless sinners has no teeth?”

The preacher crashed his fist on the pulpit, “My friends, the Lord is not put out by details. Rest assured... teeth will be provided!”<sup>1</sup>

It’s entirely possible that in assuring his congregation that teeth would be provided, the old school reverend intended to strike fear in their hearts. I, of course, found it quite humorous and I hope you did too.

Today, before we get to the question of what Matthew’s parable may have to say to us, I’d like to address a couple of background issues. Firstly, I call it “Matthew’s parable” because it is unique to Matthew’s gospel, not to be echoed in Mark or Luke’s versions of Jesus’ life and teachings. As Matthew penned these words, his community experienced hardship and uncertainty—now outside the synagogues of their sisters and brothers in

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<sup>1</sup> Pastor Tim. “Gnashing of Teeth,” Cybersalt.org, December 2, 2011:  
<https://www.cybersalt.org/clean-jokes/gnashing-of-teeth>

Jewish faith and grieving the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Rome. Matthew's community was waiting for Jesus' return and, lest they grow complacent, he offered a little extra motivation in his collection of parables and sayings known as the mini-apocalypse.

Secondly, this parable is usually interpreted with Jesus as the master and the disciples as the enslaved ones. The talents are the good news about Jesus and the "long time" that the master is away refers to the time between Jesus' departure/crucifixion/ascension and his return or second coming. The return of the master foreshadows the final judgement when accounts will be settled and those deemed by the master to be lazy are cast into outer darkness. This does seem to me the most likely interpretation of Matthew's words. The trouble is that the master, usually equated with Jesus, is not a good guy for at least three reasons.

1. He owns other human beings. These men are his property and the master has entrusted them with more of his property and expects them to further increase his wealth.
2. The master's wealth is ill-gotten. He reaps where he doesn't sow and gathers where he doesn't scatter. The master's wealth is accumulated on the backs of the less fortunate and he expects these three to employ the same dubious methods to increase his wealth in his absence.
3. The master rewards the two who do, and the one that puts his foot down and refuses to perpetuate the cycle of exploitation is punished.

Given what we know about Jesus from the gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew, he regularly preached against unjust tax collectors, crooked money-changers, and the risks of great wealth. He ministered to and with commoners, outcasts, poor people, and beggars. And he even stated that it is the poor who will inherit heaven. Given Jesus' track record, it seems unlikely to me that the third man, the one who refuses to play into his master's scheme, is really the failure. Given what we know about Jesus,

I think it's safe to say that Matthew's metaphor for Jesus as master comes up short. That said, it's possible that Matthew's words still have some meaning for us today.

I believe that, while encumbered by 1<sup>st</sup> century notions of slavery, an institution that Jesus never voiced support for, Matthew's intent here was to encourage his readers not to squander the good news entrusted to them in the time between Jesus' death and the coming of heaven's realm. I believe that his intent was to admonish his readers to act. He was saying that instead of waiting around for heaven's realm to magically appear, they needed to get out there and do something with the good news they have! Preach the good news of heaven's realm and live the good news of heaven's realm. Heal those who are sick. Minister with those who are poor. Make friends with those who are outcast. Bring those marginalized ones into community. Speak hard truths to power. Bring about heaven's realm instead of just waiting for it.

We've all heard that "waiting is hard work." While that may be true in some instances, through this parable Matthew tells his readers that waiting is not half as difficult as actually working to bring about that thing for which you're waiting—in this case, heaven's realm of peace, justice, mutuality, and love.

And so, this morning, I'll ask you—what are *you* waiting for? (*pause*)

It's true that there are some things for which all we *can* do is wait—the results of a medical test, a college admissions letter, Christmas! But there are also the things we *wait for*, but might be better served just to *work for* instead. I think that is Matthew's point. It's fine to wait for Jesus to come back and usher in the kingdom, as Matthew's community expected, but instead of *just* waiting, put your talents to work and starting building the kingdom.

As we look around the world and see the violence of ongoing conflict in the Middle East and in Ukraine; as we consider the political and racial and

social divisions right here at home; as we feel the warming of the world around us, it might be tempting to wait for a savior to come and fix our mess, or wait until everything magically works itself out. But then there's Matthew saying, "Uh uh, no no, that's the easy way—the lazy way. It's fine to wait, but you also gotta work, you gotta leverage your talents, you gotta get on your feet, and open your hearts and your hands and your mouths, and get to the task of building heaven's realm in our midst, right here, right now."

I don't know what chord Matthew's parable will strike with you this morning. Will it serve as a warning to stop putting off that thing we've been putting off? Will it serve as an admonition to quit waiting around for someone else to fix our problems and actually get our hands dirty? Will it serve as a reminder to be building heaven's realm even as we wait for it to be fully realized in our midst?

What are *you* waiting for? What are *we* waiting for? Maybe it's time to stop waiting and start working. Amen.