

## THE TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | NOVEMBER 19, 2023

ZEPHANIAH 1:7, 12-18 | PSALM 90:1-12 | 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11 |  
MATTHEW 25:14-30

When I was a kid, the church our family went to, St. Joe's, had no air conditioning. And so when we would go to 4 PM Mass on Saturday afternoons in the summer, it could get pretty hot. And one particularly steamy Saturday, the heat was starting to get the better of our priest Fr. Rick. He got up to deliver the homily on the parable of the Good Samaritan, and he said, in essence, "Just try to be nice to people. Amen."

It's tempting to sum up today's gospel reading with a similar homily. "Just try and do something with your talents. Amen."

But of course, the parable isn't quite that simple. There's a wrinkle that comes right at the end. When the master returns to see what the servants have done during his absence, he finds two servants who have taken what he gave them and grown it into more. But when he approaches the third servant expecting a similar result, what does he find? Nothing. Exactly what he gave him. Maybe with some dirt that the servant couldn't get off.

And here's where this gets interesting. The master looks at what the third servant did and said he was being lazy. Why didn't he do something useful with the money? He couldn't be bothered. Didn't feel like it.

But notice how the third servant explained his behavior. He wasn't lazy. He was what? He was afraid. He was so scared of doing the wrong thing that he did no thing.

It can be tempting for us to read a parable like this and sum it up with that one sentence homily, "Use your talents." And if this third servant was lazy, maybe that would work. Maybe all he needs is a cup of coffee, a splash of cold water on the face, and a reminder about what he's supposed to do. But that's not what the issue is. It's fear. And if it's fear, then simply telling him *Just do it.* isn't going to accomplish much. There has to be another way to deal with the problem.

This is also what St. Paul is dealing with in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians. We've talked about this a little bit before, but this book was written really close to Jesus's death and resurrection. Twenty years or so. It's probably the earliest written book in the New Testament. And this is a community that's run into an issue. Jesus was supposed to return, but he hasn't returned yet. And people have started dying. Not dying of anything particularly bad. It's just that time is starting to go by.

And so this community starts wondering. When Jesus returns, what does that mean for the people who have died? Are they included in the fullness of God's salvation? Or is it too late for them? Or, on the other hand, maybe they're okay. But it's we the living who are going to be left out. And so they come to Paul looking for advice.

Either way, what they're really getting at is what God's character is like. Is God worthy of our trust, like someone who really has our best interests at heart? Abounding in steadfast love. Or is God capricious and unreliable, someone that we need to avoid when he's in a bad mood?

These aren't entirely hypothetical questions. Most of you know that I almost always wear a collar when I'm working. And one of the funny things that happens when you walk

**ADVENT** LUTHERAN CHURCH  
777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481  
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

around in a collar is that some people just start talking to you. Sometimes it's serious stuff like people who probably have some kind of religious trauma that they're dealing with. Other times it's people who just fell out of their spiritual life, and they feel a sense of shame about it. Another super common, more benign one is someone whose grandkid hasn't been baptized yet, and they're starting to get worried.

These are all different concerns. But at the root of them all is fear. An assumption that God is upset with me. Or God is disappointed in me. Or God wants to do something bad, and I need to do something to change the situation.

So look at how St. Paul deals with this question. We get it clearest right at the end of today's reading. "For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." Notice that instead of talking about what the Thessalonians should be doing, he talks about what God has already done. The image "destined" here means something like "set up." God has not placed "set us up" for wrath or anger or punishment. That's not what God is out to do. That's not what God's end game is. Instead, God has brought us—"set us up" you could say—in the power of God's love and light. So even if the specifics get a little confusing, even if you have questions about your current situation, even when if things aren't quite going the way you thought they would, you don't need to doubt God's character. We don't need to be afraid of God and go hide somewhere. But instead we have a relationship of trust and participation.

This brings us all the way around to the gospel reading. We saw another example of trust right at the beginning of this parable. We know the landowner trusts his servants because he entrusts them with his livelihood. Sometimes when we read this parable, we think that a talent is like a dollar or something. It's about as much as this man would expect to make in twenty years. For the first servant, it would be well over a million dollars today. Now, I don't know about you, but if I didn't trust someone, if I was trying to set them up for failure or lure them into doing something stupid, the last thing I would do is give them a million dollars of my own money and say, "Let's see what happens."

But fear has a way of making gifts look like liabilities. And so when the landowner invites this servant to participate in his work, fear kicks in. What could be an opportunity starts to look like one pitfall after another. He starts thinking of all the things that could go wrong, all the things the master might hypothetically do, instead of looking at what the landowner actually has already done for him.

It's not so different for us. How can we trust that God loves us? This parable highlights one answer among many. God trusts us to continue Christ's mission for the sake of the world. When God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit and sends us in mission, it's not a little trainer-version of God's mission or the little playset where you can pretend you're doing the real thing. The ways that we live out our vocations as individuals and as a community are the real thing. It's life and death. It's forgiveness and reconciliation. It's justice and peace.

God loves us enough to take a risk on us. And God trusts us enough to give us this vocation. "You're set up just right," God encourages us. "Come and enter into my joy."

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

**ADVENT** LUTHERAN CHURCH  
777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481  
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG