

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Lect. 33)  
November 19, 2017  
Matthew 25:14-30

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### **This Little Light of Mine**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

A man goes on a journey, leaving his servants to care for his money, called talents. Two of them double his money. One, aware of his master's harsh ways, stuffs it in his mattress, returning only what was given upon the master's return. Those who gained return on their investments are entrusted with even more. The timid and fearful servant is taken to task, and the money in his care is given to another.

Here again is the moral of the story as Matthew has it:

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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is a tough parable. And it is interpreted by various scholars and authors in very different ways.

Some suggest that it is about the demands of God, and that the wrath of God is a threat to keep us in line. With this interpretation, God is the master who left on a journey; but the harsh judgment of the master at the end is anything but the behavior of a gracious God.

Others hold that the story justifies capitalism or self-improvement. After all, the lesson seems to be that the more money we make, the more righteous we are.

But of course, that takes the parable far too literally, and is far too self-serving to be of any spiritual value.

Indeed, the parable of the talents that we hear in today's gospel is one of the trickier parables. One scholar (John Pilch, "The Cultural World of Jesus") asserts that the Mediterranean peasants who first listened to this story wouldn't share the modern concern for capitalism or the culture of self-improvement. The story would, rather, reinforce their view that people like the master exist in their experience, and are dishonorable, shameless, and rapacious in reaping that which is not theirs to begin with.

In fact, there are other versions of this parable from the first century that conclude with the third slave being viewed as the only honorable person in the entire story, taking the safe and prudent course of action. So, we ought not jump to the conclusion that the master is demonstrating the behavior of God. Rather, the story is illustrative of the kinds of oppressive ownership issues with which people in the world of Jesus struggled every day.

But what about those of us who are hearing the parable this morning? What might Jesus be saying to us here and now?

It is a strong theme in Matthew, notably in the Sermon on the Mount, that we are not to hide our light under a bushel. A city on a hill cannot be hid. As the old song says, we are to let our light shine, so that others might see our good works and give glory to God.

Last week, I got to do the children's sermon, and we talked about keeping the lamps of our hearts burning. Let's remember that and emphasize that point, extended in today's sermon, by lighting that lamp again. [Acolyte]

Will you sing with me "This Little Light of Mine"?

This little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine.  
Oh, this little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine.  
Yes, this little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine.  
Let it shine. Let it shine. Let it shine.

That's what Matthew says in chapter 5. To hide our light, to hide the city of God, to hide the church, to hide our good works, is to deny others the opportunity to give God the glory and praise our God richly deserves. (Worship That Works, Kirk Alan Kubiek)

We are the children of God blessed with the gifts—the talents—of God. The parable, while judging the oppressive ways of those who abuse their power (much in the news these days), also calls each one of us to let our talents—the light of God shining through us—have their full effect.

You are the light of Christ shining in the world.  
Let your light shine.  
You work for Jesus.  
Serving and shining on people everywhere, of every variety.  
Let your light shine.  
Put it high on a stand  
Let it shine in every heart  
Everywhere in every land  
Don't hide it in the ground

Don't bury it in the sand  
You are the light.  
The light of the world.  
A city on a hill cannot be hid  
Let your light shine  
So others might see your good works  
And give glory to God.

I really like this simplest interpretation.

Don't hide your light. "Don't put your light under a bushel basket."

Let your light shine. We are, as Paul reminds us, not children of darkness, but children of the light.

This little light of mine; I'm gonna let it shine.

That's the message of the day. Do you think you can handle that much profundity in one sermon?

But seriously, it is more profundity than we can handle in a lifetime. Letting the light within shine—the light of the Christ that lives and shines in our hearts—is not simple matter.

It takes putting aside our fears. We live in an era of incredibly fast change. It is daunting to realize that what worked in building communities of faith 20 years ago, 10 years ago, or only last year may not work today. The landscapes of this country and the greater world are in rapid transition, and as a church we cannot remain as we were and expect to be accessible and open to such a radically changing world. It's why we've spent so much time reflecting about how the 500-year-old-Reformation might continue among us into its sixth century.

In our fear of change and what that might entail, we can easily fall into the pit of the servant who hides the master's talent in the ground:

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.

In a world of change, it may well be that God is in the business of reaping where we least expect the Spirit to have sown, gathering where Christianity's seed was apparently not scattered. Today's gospel is an invitation for us to look outside of our staid, historical boundaries at a world where God is harvesting spiritual abundance in the most unlikely places.

For those of us who live in a land that is increasingly unchurched, this invitation is a declaration of our mission. We can no longer expect to harvest where Christianity once sowed. Many who join the fellowship of the church in these days are new to the church. Some, whose sense of the church is distorted by media representations, may even consider the Christian faith absurd or counter-productive.

Letting our light shine means putting aside our fears, including the fear or unwillingness to risk. We are tempted to be like the bad slave, to be afraid of being bold enough to try something new; to be scared of investing our gifts given to us not simply for ourselves, but for a world in need.

Investing our talents—letting our lights shine—means not hiding them, but carrying our gifts for ministry into the most unlikely fields of mission—sinking resources into endeavors that we might not have imagined yesterday; getting “outside the box” of our normal ways and really throwing our doors open wide. We are doing this with our now official practice of fully open communion, welcoming everyone as Christ does to share the fellowship of the Lord’s Table. We are stewards of both God’s talents and Christ’s hospitality, not guarding gifts closely, but sharing them as widely and as openly as possible. And we do so for the sake of God’s purposes in the world—to transform souls with spiritual food, to nurture God’s gifts in each person, and to send those gifts out into a waiting and hurting world that yearns for belonging and purpose, forgiveness and grace, transformation and salvation.

What awaits us on the other side of such new risks for the sake of the gospel is the promise of the parable--that some of us will double, and perhaps even more than double, our investment as we participate with God in the practice of reaping where we did not sow, and gathering where we did not scatter.

And what also awaits us is precisely what we seek in the deepest places of our hearts, the one thing we know that will conquer our fears of change, our fears of trying something new. When we walk out into the world, we will meet God’s Spirit there, waiting for us; and not just to settle our accounts, but to invite us into the joy of an abundant life that Christ is preparing for all creation.

So, let your lights shine. The light that is in you is a gift of God. It is powerful. And it has a unique and essential purpose in the church as well as in the world. Don’t let anyone put it out, put it down, or put it aside.

Don’t bury it! Let it shine! Let it shine! Let it shine!. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.