

“Using God’s Gifts”  
Psalm 123: 1-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11;  
Matthew 25:14-30

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Oftentimes when we read a particular passage, we don’t look at the passages before and after. It’s interesting that this particular passage starts off with the words, “It is like…” What is “it”? We have to actually look back to the passage that we read last week to see what that might be. Jesus has been talking about and comparing his stories to the kingdom of heaven.

Last week, he told a story about needing lamps to light the way for a bridegroom and keeping them burning, and this is like the kingdom of heaven. I don’t think he is talking about heaven. He is talking about the kingdom of heaven *on earth*. He’s talking about a place where the will of God is done *on earth*.

As we begin this passage, again, it is about what the kingdom of heaven is like; that is, God’s will being done on earth is like this story in some way. We can use this passage to see what Jesus is teaching about God’s will being done on earth.

The other thing about this is that Jesus is coming to the end of his earthly ministry, so in some ways this passage is about Jesus telling his disciples he’s not going to be with them. He’s not going to be guiding them and they are going to have to keep their lights burning on their own for a while. This passage also is about what they might do while he is gone.

It begins with the master giving the servants, the slaves, some resources to work with. And not just a little bit of resource. It says he gives them five, two, and one talent. It turns out that a talent is about 15 years’ worth of the daily wage for a day laborer. So, this is a fairly good sum of money in most people’s eyes. The master is giving these people a good amount of resource for them to work with as he goes away. Perhaps Jesus is suggesting the same thing – that he has given his disciples resources to work with while he is gone, while he is away.

He has given it according to their abilities. That’s an interesting phrase, that he has given to each according to their abilities, so not everyone has the same abilities. There is a sense of equity here. Not everyone is expected to do exactly the same thing, but use their own particular abilities with the resources they are given.

We can see that given these resources, there’s an expectation here that they do something with them, that the resources get used. It’s interesting to think about the nature of what they do. They take these resources, and they produce

something new. That's really not unusual for Jesus to talk about. He talks about seeds and what they produce, and that we might be part of that work, producing something for the kingdom of God, or in the kingdom of God.

One of the interesting things, I think, about this passage is the word "talent." Because it was part of this particular parable, it came into the English language, maybe through a German pathway, meaning *gifts and graces*. It was the precursor of the way we think about talents today – the talent somebody has to do something. Talent and ability work together here. Except that in this particular passage it is pretty clear that a talent is about money. It's about those resources that this master has given. So how did this idea that talents were gifts and graces come about if it is about money in this particular passage?

Jesus is suggesting here that the one slave who gets reprimanded is the one who buries his one talent. And yet, there is historical evidence that suggests that is exactly what Jewish tradition would have suggested was the right thing to do, because usury was not considered good. How is Jesus using this and in some way getting people's attention because of it, in an unusual way? It seems to me what he's doing is setting up a distinction. We have to look again at both what comes before and what comes afterwards.

As we are reading this we recognize that he initially said you have to keep your lamps burning. Here he is suggesting there is something about using the resources we have, the gifts, graces, and abilities we have to do God's work, to be productive in God's kingdom. What I'm going to suggest is that as we get here towards the end, he is going to give us two endings. The first ending is the one we read today of how the master comes back and his currency, what he cares about, the tool he wants his servants using, is the resources he gave them and their ability to increase his wealth. That's the goal of this earthly king. He's going to be pretty harsh on the one who doesn't do that.

How is this like the kingdom of heaven? But also, how is it a contrast to that kingdom of heaven? Part of that we are going to have to wait until next week to see because, I think, we actually get a second ending.. In this part of the story, we have the earthly master's return, and he gives one ending to the story. Next week we will hear the second ending about Jesus returning, and how Jesus holds his disciples accountable. It will be about the ones who were able to care for the least among us. It will be about clothing the naked, caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, visiting those in prison.

What I'm suggesting is that there are two different currencies in the two different kingdoms. Jesus is setting up this contrast. The earthly kingdom has its currency: the desire for wealth, the use of money to create that wealth, and that's the goal. The goal of the master is not to care about the slaves, but to care

about the wealth. The slave that does the poorest gets thrown out. There is no care for that slave. There's a distinction.

But the currency of the kingdom of God is about the light we bring into the darkness. It is about the love of God and the love of neighbor. The currency of the kingdom is care for the least among us. It's a different set of currencies. The currency of the kingdom, you might say, is love. Its desire to care results in actions that bring about that caring.

In some ways I think it is the very same kind of distinction we sometimes make in our present situation. We have two currencies at work. One currency that says we need the freedom to maintain or increase our wealth, and we're not going to let any pandemic get in the way of that. Or we can have the currency of care, the currency of grace, the currency of love that is more along the kingdom's values. It says we need to take care of one another. We need to find the ways of doing that. If it means shutting down businesses for a time, if it means we need to use the wealth we've got to care for people whose jobs may be at risk during a time of crisis, it's first about the care for people's lives. If we need to deal with our world in a way that we don't increase the sickness and death that comes with this pandemic, it's a way of caring for each other, for our world, and for the least among us.

It feels like we live in a time where we have to decide what currency is most important. Is it a currency that gives us wealth even at the expense of people on the front lines in hospitals, those who have to go to work in spite of the danger to themselves and others? Or is it a currency of care that figures out how to use that wealth to reduce the risk and save livelihoods? It's not that we are going to get rid of the currency of money and wealth, but it needs to be subservient to the currency of care so that we can live out the very will of God among us, that is, the love for God and the love for one another. We can show each other grace. We can mask up because we care. We can think about the ways we can control the spread of the virus.

What is the currency that is most important in our lives and what is the goal of using that currency? I think Matthew 25 sets up the distinction between the earthly king whose currency is wealth and that's what's cared about, while the least among those in his kingdom get thrown out into the outer darkness and aren't even considered human. But in God's kingdom, the counting is for our care for one another, the way we have given that to one another.

So as we go into this week, I invite us to think about what is our currency and the goal of the currency we are using. Are we allowing the will of God, the love of God and love of neighbor, the currency of care, to be our currency? How do we live that out moment to moment, day to day, showing the character of God's children? Amen.