

### ***The Master Came and Settled Accounts***

In the name of him who died for us so that whether we are awake or asleep we might live with him, dear friends in Christ: The Gospel readings for these last three Sundays of the Church year all come St. Matthew. Together they are part of a larger discourse in which Jesus is explaining to his disciples how things will unfold at the end of this age. Last week we heard the parable of the Ten Virgins, five of whom were wise and five foolish. The wise young ladies thought ahead. Not knowing how long they might have to wait for the arrival of the Bridegroom (which represents the coming of Christ), they each brought an extra flask of oil to keep their lamps burning throughout the long hours of the night. The foolish did not. Thus it happened at midnight when the Bridegroom appeared, the wise virgins were ready to join him in the joyful procession to the wedding hall. They entered into it with him to celebrate the wedding and partake of the feast. The five foolish whose lamps had gone out had to grope their way back to the market in the dark, wake the sellers of oil (who were probably none too happy about it), make their quick purchases, and run back to the celebration. But by then it was too late. The door was closed. Frantically pounding on it, they begged for entry; only to hear the Bridegroom speak those dreadful words: "Go away. I don't know who you are."

Jesus' message came through loud and clear: you must be prepared at all times, because you do not know the day or hour of his return. Make sure you've got the fuel to keep your lamp of faith burning. No one can hear God's Word for you. No one can receive the Sacrament for you. No one can confess your sins and receive absolution for you. No one can by these means receive the Holy Spirit for you. You've got to keep on doing them for yourself. And if you're wise, you will. That's what will keep your lamp of faith burning brightly in the long night of this age.

Good. That much is clear. Okay, it happens that today's Gospel lesson follows hot on the heels of last week's. It's the parable of the Talents. And if the main point of the Ten Virgins is be prepared, then the point of today's lesson is stay active and productive.

You heard the story. A wealthy landowner is going to be gone for a while. He calls in his servants and entrusts each of them with a certain amount of capital to work with while he's away. To some he gives more than others, based on what he perceives to be their potential. To one he gives five talents, to another two, and to the last guy he gives just one. But don't think that's a mere pittance. A talent represents what the average working man would earn in about two years' time. So, what's that? In modern terms something in the range of \$100,000? That's not chump change. It's a substantial investment.

All right, then after a long time – probably longer than anyone expected – the master came and settled accounts with his servants. He called them in one by one to learn what they had done with what he had invested in them. He wanted to see how much each had earned for him by their diligent industry and skill. The first two showed that they had taken the responsibility seriously and they'd been busy working for their master. They'd taken what he gave them, invested it wisely, and produced an increase – in both cases of 100%. The master was pleased with their performance, praised their ingenuity and industry, and promised to reward them with greater still responsibility. "You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."

The third guy didn't fare as well. He had an entirely different attitude about serving his master. Whereas the others saw him as kind and generous and sought to please him with their

efforts, this fellow saw him as hard and overbearing. His master's investment was to him not an opportunity to serve gladly, but rather a frightful burden to bear. He buried his talent to keep it hidden and safe, and presented it back to his master as if he ought to be pleased with what he'd done with it. The master was not at all pleased. He was furious that his servant had not even exercised the bare minimum effort of putting his investment in a bank where it would at least draw a tiny bit of interest. "You wicked and lazy servant ... Take what he has and give it to someone who will actually do something worthwhile with it ... And cast this worthless servant into outer darkness." Ouch. That didn't end well for him, did it?

That's the parable. Now let's unpack what it means. The principal characters aren't hard to figure out. Clearly Jesus himself is the Master who's away on a journey just as he was the absent Bridegroom in the preceding parable. We should not infer from this that Jesus is actually gone. We know that he is here with us in his Word and Sacraments. It's just that we don't see him as he will come physically in the fullness of his glory – not yet, anyway. And the master's servants, well, they are obviously each one of us.

A little harder to figure out is what the talents the master distributes represent in the parable. Theologians have suggested many different individual things; but I think it best to take a much wider view. Simply ask, what has the Lord invested in you? What has he given you to work with on his behalf for his kingdom?

We could start with the Gospel itself. He's given you his own Son, his Son made flesh to live, to die as a sacrifice for your sin, and to rise again to new life so that you can be raised from your life of sin and walk with him in newness of life for all eternity. He's washed you in Baptism and made you his child and heir. He's given you his Spirit to give you faith in this Good News, his Holy Spirit who also leads and guides you on the path of righteousness. He's gives you the ability to live in the joy of this Good News and to share it with others. What are you doing with his investment?

In a broader sense he's given you his whole wisdom and counsel in his Holy Word. He gives you Christ on every sentence and paragraph of Scripture, Christ to shape your mind, to transform your heart, to bend your rebellious will to his and so make you more productive for his kingdom. He gives you opportunities to read and learn more on your own and with others under trained teachers. What are you doing with his investment?

He's given you the gift of prayer. He invites you to make your requests known to him as a child would ask his parents. He's given you the promise that for Christ's sake he will hear and answer your prayers. What are you doing with his investment?

He's given you your body. He's made it his own temple – a holy thing to be used only for holy purposes. He gives you the means to maintain it properly in good health and not to abuse it. What are you doing with his investment?

He's given you your family and he's assigned you a place in it. He's made you a child with parents to respect and honor; a husband or wife with a spouse to love and cherish; a parent with children to protect, to care for, and to raise in the faith; a grandparent with little ones so that you can spoil them rotten – okay, that was a joke. You grandparents know your what your duties are. But again the question is what are you doing with his investment?

Besides your immediate and extended family, he's given you this church family, a fellowship of faith: a family that encourages, shares together joys and hardships, bears one another's burdens, and gathers to receive his gifts of Word and Sacrament; a family that

together supports and extends the work of his kingdom. What are you doing with his investment?

Okay, the things I've mentioned thus far the Lord has invested in us in more or less equal measure. Sure, some families are bigger than others, but the roles and responsibilities are the same. There are other things the Lord invests in his children that are not equally distributed. Take, for example, the talents and natural abilities the Lord has given you. Run down the list: brains, brawn, charisma, leadership, technical skills, musical ability, personality, yes, common sense, all this and more – the Lord has determined how much or little you have. We possess them in different proportion. But the Lord also intends that whatever combination he's given you, you put to work as best you can to support the work of his kingdom. Two problems can crop up here. One is that you might not like the role you're best suited for and so resist it. Then you're not investing God's gift wisely. The other is that in order to avoid a role you *are* suited for, you might "bury" your talent by hiding it from view. In the parable Jesus makes it pretty clear that he takes a dim view of either of these approaches. A good servant recognizes his strengths and plays to them. He serves gladly where he serves best. At the same time he works on improving his weaknesses so that he may be more effective overall. But regarding talents and natural abilities, you know best what the Lord has invested in you. What are you doing with his investment?

Another thing the Lord invests in us in unequal proportion is wealth and material possessions, also the ability to increase wealth. Some are better at it than others. Obviously the Lord has filled this world with all kinds of good things for us to enjoy, and he intends that we do. But he also gives us wealth to allow us to participate in the work of his kingdom, to support the church and its missions, and to assist the poor and needy. One day the master will come and call you to account for how you used the wealth he assigned you. What are you doing with his investment?

At last we come to a final item that the Lord does give to us in equal measure. It's time. And much that was said about wealth applies here. That is, we need some for ourselves: for sleeping, personal hygiene, recreation, and everything else we do. The stewardship issue here is determining how much you think you need for yourself and how much you're willing to spend on other worthy causes. And besides just frittering away this precious resource in frivolous pursuits, which we are all guilty of, perhaps the greatest offense to good stewardship in this category comes in the form of procrastination. You tell yourself I'll be more spiritual tomorrow, or next week, or next year. That's when I'll pray. That's when I'll spend time in the Scriptures. That's when I'll get around to volunteering. That's when I'll see if I can help my neighbor in need. But investments made in time are like money put down earning interest. The sooner you invest, the more the investment grows. A good servant doesn't wait. He invests the time as soon as he has it. Each day God gives you the same amount of time he gives to every else. What are you doing with his investment?

I've asked the question repeatedly now. The point is that you should be constantly asking it of yourself because one day it won't be me asking, it will be the Lord who will come and settle accounts. He's going to want to see what you did with what he invested in you.

How will you fare? Let me suggest that it depends entirely on your attitude toward serving him. If you see the Lord as gracious and loving, if you understand that everything you are and have belong to the Lord, if you rejoice that you've been bought with a price, namely the precious blood of his Son, well, then you will apply yourself gladly to his service. If, on the other hand, you see the Lord as hard and demanding, a taskmaster who is never satisfied; if you think

of his service as a burden to bear: “Yes, I’ll do it; but only because I must”, then your reluctance will show through and you’ll end up burying the talents the Lord has invested in you.

Let’s not go there. Let’s recognize the Lord as he is: gracious and abounding in steadfast love, who for Christ’s sake forgives us when we fail, and lifts us up with him to fulfill his purposes in our lives. Let’s ask him to help us number our days aright and to utilize the many talents he’s invested in us for the work and service of his kingdom, so that when he does come to settle accounts we may hear those blessed words: “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***