

Faithful Servants  
Matthew 25:14-30

I know it's Father's Day, but believe it or not, it's already the season for Federal elections. Both parties held primaries last Tuesday, and the incumbents in two Mississippi House districts, Michael Guest and Stephen Palazzo, have been forced into runoffs which will take place on June 28. Palazzo's reputation has recently taken a hit because of an investigation into whether he spent campaign funds on personal expenses. As a result, many of his constituents have begun to question whether he is a good steward of the funds that have been entrusted to him.

But it isn't just public officials who are trustees. No, according to this parable, all of us are simply stewards of the gifts God has given to each of us. And we are all called to exercise our stewardship in a faithful manner until the time that Jesus comes again.

And, as we've seen over the last few weeks, Jesus will, in fact, return. Starting at the beginning of chapter 24, Jesus told His disciples that the signs of His coming would be unmistakable, just as the time of His return would be unpredictable. That's why He urged them not to be deceived into thinking that they would receive the wealth and power that they craved in this world. Instead, He insisted that they should be on the alert, always ready for His appearing.

But what does it mean to be ready for Jesus' coming? What is Jesus calling us to do while we wait for Him to return? Well, last week, we learned some of what such readiness doesn't mean. It doesn't mean neglecting our responsibility to care for others, much less taking advantage of our authority to abuse them. Likewise, it doesn't mean losing sight of our principal responsibility: to glorify Christ in everything we say and do.

So, what does it really mean to be ready for Jesus' coming? Well, according to today's passage, it means dutifully going about His business in His absence, just as the man in this parable expected his servants to do. Simply put, if we would be ready for Jesus to come back, we must be faithful stewards while He is away.

And make no mistake – each of these servants was entrusted with a very large sum indeed. For in those days, a talent was the largest monetary unit, amounting to 6,000 denarii. So, how much would that be in today's money? Well, a denarius amounted to a day's wages for a laborer, so in modern Mississippi, one denarius would be worth about \$58.00. A little basic arithmetic thus reveals that one talent would be worth \$348,000, while ten talents amount to \$3.48 million.

So, how could a parable about such matters of high finance possibly apply to us? After all, we don't have that kind of cash lying around – we're struggling just to put gas in our tanks! And we're short on lots of other kinds of resources too, aren't we? How many of us are wrestling with declining health or energy? No, it's easy for us to come to the conclusion that we don't have any abilities or interests that God could possibly use in His service. As the hymnwriter makes clear, we cannot all speak like angels or preach like Paul.

But that hymn goes on, doesn't it? Even if we don't have \$3 million or even \$300,000 to invest, even if we aren't the most compelling speakers or the most sterling examples of Christian virtue, we cannot deny that God has given every Christian some significant gifts. So no matter how great or small they may be, we can use what we have to promote the work of the Kingdom in the King's temporary absence. Instead of saying, "I can't," we can say, "Send me."

But is that really true? Do we really have such valuable gifts? Well, we can't deny that every Christian has been brought out of the darkness, the confusion and guilt of sin into God's marvelous light. Moreover, every Christian has been freed from the power of sin, released to live for God's glory instead of our self-interest. And every Christian has been filled with God's Holy Spirit. Yes, no matter where we are and no matter what we are doing, God Himself has promised to be with all who love and trust Jesus.

Those are all amazing gifts, but God hasn't stopped there. For every Christian has also been blessed with the means of grace. We all have the opportunity to pray and to study God's Word in Scripture. We all have access to the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the signs and seals of God's ever-faithful promises. And we have been given to each other, made one in the body of Christ, thus sharing in the common gift of the fellowship and discipline of the Church. Oh yes, there can be no doubt that all of us Christians have been richly blessed.

But as we wait for our Lord to return, how can we be good stewards of all these gifts? How can we use them to advance the cause of His kingdom? Well, whenever we are honest in our confession and repentance, we are testifying to the reality of the changes God is making in our lives. Whenever we turn away from the pursuit of happiness and pleasure and focus instead on purity and holiness, we are demonstrating the new life within us, a life lived in the presence of God and for His glory. By abandoning our pride, we can demonstrate our dependence on

God and on one another. And by showing the love of Christ while we share the good news of His grace, others will be more likely to come to Christ just like we have. His kingdom will be thus be expanded as others hear our words and see our works and follow the same One Whom we follow.

Okay, so what if we are faithful stewards in this way? What kind of reward can we expect? Well, we might be tempted to think that only those who have the greatest possessions or abilities will receive the greatest rewards. After all, the man entrusted with five talents made five more, while the man who started out with two only made two more. Just so, it's easy to think that our gifts couldn't possibly amount to much. It's easy to look at the thousands of members in big churches in big towns, or the millions of dollars that wealthy philanthropists give to charity and fall into despair. I mean, MacKenzie Scott not only writes novels – she gave \$25 million to Alcorn State. What can any of us do that could possibly come close to that?

But the good news is that it doesn't matter how great or small our gifts may be at first. It doesn't matter whether the task God has set before us is a big one or a small one – we are all simply called to be faithful servants, to use whatever gifts we have for God's glory and for the good of others.

For remember: the servant who earned five talents heard exactly the same words as the servant who earned only two: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

Yes, both faithful servants ended up receiving the same reward, the only thing that really matters, the only gift that has eternal significance: the gift of being in God's presence, the gift of God Himself. And that's the same gift that Christ promises to all those who love and trust Him, to all who long for Him to return.

For isn't that what He told us in our responsive reading? Yes, at His Last Supper, He told His disciples that He had to go away from them for a time. After all, in those days, before a bridegroom could take His bride in marriage, he had to prepare a place for the couple to live, usually by building a room onto his father's house. Just so, Jesus said that He has gone away only so that He can prepare many mansions, many dwelling places to accommodate all His faithful servants.

And so when He comes back to get us, when we join Him in celebrating the great marriage feast of the Lamb, we can be sure that we will get to live forever with the One Who has not only entrusted so many gifts to each of us in this world, but Who has also loved us enough to die for us. What greater motivation could any of us have for being His faithful servants? What more could anyone possibly want in either this world or the next?

But that leads us to the most puzzling part of this parable – the man who received the one talent but hid it in a hole in the ground. Why would he do that? I mean, his master entrusted him with well over \$300,000, so it really wouldn't have been that much of a stretch for him to make at least a little profit on it. After all, even in these days of historically low interest rates, if you are willing to lock up that kind of cash for 10 years in a Certificate of Deposit, you could easily net about \$10,000 per year. Reasonably safe stocks or bonds would yield much more, with very little risk.

So, why didn't this wicked servant do even that much? Why did he just go and hide his master's money? Wasn't he honored to have been entrusted with such a vast sum? Wasn't he longing for his master to return so that he could show him how much he had improved his master's financial position? Wasn't he interested in being a faithful steward?

Well, no, no he wasn't. And that's because he didn't have the right sort of relationship with his master. In fact, verse 24 makes it clear that he didn't really trust his master at all. Instead, he saw his master as the kind of man who reaps in a field he did not sow, or in other words, a man who takes what doesn't belong to him. This faithless servant was convinced that his master was a hard man, so it's no wonder that he was so afraid of him that he wouldn't take even the smallest risk on his behalf.

Now, that's not the way a bride looks at her groom, is it? That's not the way sheep look at their shepherd, is it? That's not the way we Christians look at Christ, right? No, even though the wicked servant allowed his master to trust him with a huge sum of money, he never really did trust his master. He was never really on his master's side.

Now, I know we don't want to think we have anything in common with this guy. But maybe we should think again. I mean, even though we're all grateful for the means of grace God has given to us, do we ever allow our worship or prayer or study to become a duty instead of a joy? And yes, we know we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But do we ever become anxious that we somehow aren't good enough or that we aren't working hard enough for God? And when the circumstances of our lives take an unpleasant or even

painful turn, do we ever catch ourselves wondering if God is hard or unfair? Do we ever question His judgment or doubt His love?

But if we allow ourselves to go on thinking like this, if we allow our faithful stewardship to degenerate into joyless legalism, well, it will show up in our actions, won't it? After all, Jesus said that you can know a tree by its fruit. So, just like this unfaithful servant, it's those who don't really love and trust God who won't be busy about doing the work of the kingdom, right? They won't be busy glorifying Him and blessing each other. And so it's no wonder that, when the King comes again, that sort of person will end up being cut off from the greatest blessing of all – the very presence of God.

But we don't have to run away from the only source of life and light into a place of darkness and pain. Instead, let's abandon all bitterness and fear. Let's trust in the One Who has given us so many gifts. Let's use those gifts to the best of our abilities so that everyone around us can see the unconditional, self-sacrificial love of the One Who died for us. Let's work as hard as we can to advance the cause of His Kingdom so that when He comes, we'll be able to hear Him say, "Well done, faithful servant, well done."