

## *“Self Limitation”*

Sunday, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

 Matthew 25:14-30 (CEB)

[On Screen]

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

*Thanks, be to God.*

[2<sup>ND</sup> Service: Affirmation of Faith]

Didn't we just *finish* our annual stewardship campaign?

We asked for your support and you responded.

Thanks to Janie Moore for her report on the results of that campaign.

Yet, the conventional reading of this text leads us to consider our “talents” – gifts, skills, resources – and how they function within God's economy.

Bringing this up today sounds like giving the team a pep talk after the game is over... What's the point?

The thing is: this traditional use of the text misses the compelling theological significance of Matthew's purpose in placing this parable at this point in his writing.

This is the third of four stories Jesus tells about the implications of the impending, yet unscheduled, end of the world as we know it...The Eschaton.

All four stories center on the return of the master or bridegroom or king, the judgements that come with that return, and how those who await his return spend their time.

A “*stewardship*” view has strong theological ties to what God has done *for* us, while an “*eschatological*” view is more concerned with what God will do *with* us.

**Let us pray...** Lord, today we seek your guidance in recognizing what you want to do with us. Help us to hear this parable in a new way that focuses on your *plans* more than your past deeds. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Last week we talked about waiting as an active pursuit, rather than just sitting around.

In today's story, the master leaves his servants alone for an unspecified length of time, during which they each make choices about how they will spend their time waiting.

Again, the active wins over the passive; the wise over the foolish; the faithful over the faithless.

Matthew's theology has a decidedly "*future outlook*".

Matthew tells stories about the **end of time**; about what God plans to do with us and for us.

This theology carries a judgmental component as well; when the Master returns, we will be held accountable.

I want to explore the idea of "self-limitation" as a way of helping us to navigate our time spent waiting between God's generosity and God's judgement.

The parable begins "*as if a man were going on a journey*"; extending the "*Kingdom is like*" image.

In this scene, the Kingdom of heaven begins in an act of divine generosity.

It is as if a man has extravagantly entrusted extraordinary wealth, power, freedom, and responsibility to others.

Like Creation, the gift is freely and generously given.

Interpretation has probably changed the significance of this gift over time.

Our modern understanding of a “talent” being a gift or an ability is derived from this parable.

However, in its historical context, a talent was a unit of money that equaled about fifteen years of earnings by an ordinary day laborer.

All three of the gifts from this man are enormous and extremely generous.

The man with five talents was entrusted with more than a lifetime’s worth of average wages.

From this perspective, the man is more generous than anyone can imagine.

It would be easy for us to understand the master only from the perspective of the servant and to see the servant only through the master's eyes.

To give this much, the man must be a very wealthy man and such a man would certainly strike fear into his servants.

It is easy to see why the third servant views his master as harsh and that he fears his wrath.

But, if we can look at the master's actions and see generosity in place of harshness, can we also look at the servant and see something besides fear and trembling?

We have seen how generous the master has been and we've seen how he rewards those who respond to his generosity.

Although the third slave imagines that his master is harsh, it seems as if the master is fair and only reacts harshly in response to the servant's failure.

He does not squander his gift or use it for his own benefit; he simply does nothing.

Out of fear, he creates the conditions that lead to his failure and ends up with the negative results he imagined.

Perhaps Matthew wants us to realize that the God we face is the one we imagine.

We limit our selves when we limit God by putting God in a box designed by our limited vision.

God who is limitless places no limits on us and what can be done through us.

We put limits on God and build obstacles that prevent us from doing and being all that God wants.

By doing nothing, the third servant neglects the opportunity to increase the gift and offer blessings to the master and to others.

The same is true of us when we mistake faithful waiting for static living.

We are often good at **knowing** without *doing*.

We are adept at holding on to a talent, knowing what we **should** do with it, but not doing it.

We know what faithful living looks like, but we hesitate to live like it.

We bury too much goodness, time, love, treasure, and talent in the ground.

*And it may not be without good reasons.*

Perhaps some of us feel like our talent is just too small to make a real difference, so we don't try.

Some may feel like others have more to offer so let them handle things.

Others may have offered their talents in the past and been shut down for their efforts.

There may be distrust or even jealousy at work that tries to paralyze the process.

Whatever the restriction may be, fear often keeps us from doing what we know the Master wants as we reject a generous opportunity.

When I say we face the God we imagine, I mean that what we think about God is important.

How we imagine God in our lives and how we respond to God is not trivial nor incidental.

We have real choices and power, with genuine consequences resulting from the way we use our free will.

What we do or *fail* to do shapes the world in which we live and the lives we are living.

It is surely not the only factor, but it **is** significant.

God has given all of us amazing gifts.

From the air we breathe to the complex bodies we inhabit to our skills and abilities and the people we love and who love us – ***God is good!***

***Yes***, we already finished our financial stewardship campaign for this year, but we can still talk about stewardship of everything else.

**That includes stewardship of the greatest treasure we have – salvation in Jesus Christ.**

God's generosity calls for thoughtful and generous response from us.



I was in a meeting the other day and we were talking about styles of preaching.

Someone mentioned that their preaching professor in seminary told them that the first step in building a sermon is to find the Good News.

Without the Good News, there really is no reason to preach.

Teaching the commandments and sharing the gospel so that everyone can live without limits was a clear priority for Jesus.

God offers us limitless Good News, grace, eternal life, and love.

We are the ones who place the limits on these gifts when we fail to use them.

Knowing this Good News and not sharing it is like knowing there is a vast treasure hidden deep underground, but through indifference or inactivity, leaving that treasure buried rather than digging it up for everyone to enjoy.

**Let us all share God's Good News without limits!**

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.**