



Order of Service

Date: Sunday November 15th, 2020

Pentecost 24A

We acknowledge that we are worshipping on the traditional lands of the Boon Wurrung people, of the Kulin nation, and pay our respects to elder's past, present and emerging.

INTROIT – A world of difference (vs 1, chorus), Copyright © 2007 Monica O'Brien & Gina Ogilvie.

Verse 1

Will you dare to see the future
where peace and hope are real,
where nations stop their bickering
and hearts begin to heal?
Do you think that this will happen,
no matter what we do?
No! The future is impatient
and it's calling me and you!

Chorus

We can make a world of difference, it depends on you and me.
We can build a new tomorrow when we begin to see
that change is really possible, where we can live as one.
Let's make our world a better place, our dream has now begun!

CALL TO WORSHIP

Inspired by Psalm 123

One: We lift our eyes to you, O God; we lift our spirits in worship.

All: We look to you, seeking guidance and comfort.

One: We look to you seeking healing and renewal.

All: We look to you, seeking mercy and grace;

One: for we have had our fill of struggles and stress.

All: We have had more than our fill of worrying and wondering.

One: To you, O God, we lift our eyes and spirits, with hope and confidence in your love.

All: Be known to us as we worship and help us find rest.

Sing – TIS 627 (To tune “Morning has broken”)

1

Praise and thanksgiving,
Father, we offer,
for all things living
you have made good;
harvest of sown fields,
fruits of the orchard,
hay from the mown fields,
blossom and wood.

2

Lord, bless the labour
we bring to serve you,
that with our neighbour
we may be fed.
Sowing or tilling,
we would work with you;
harvesting, milling,
for daily bread.

3

Father, providing
food for your children,
your wisdom guiding
teaches us share
one with another,
so that, rejoicing,
sister and brother
may know your care.

4

Then will your blessing
reach every people;
each one confessing
your gracious hand;
where you are reigning
no one will hunger,
your love sustaining
fruitful the land.

WELCOME

May the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God
and the communion of the Holy Spirit
be with you all!

And also with you!

Opening prayer

You have given us each many talents, Gracious Creator, and we give thanks to you for such generosity and kindness.

You have given us, as a community, many opportunities to reflect your beauty, wisdom, and love, and for this, we give thanks.

You have bestowed upon us opportunities to invest the gifts you have given us – to reach out in faithful joy and to share from our abundance.

And you have called us together in worship and invite us to be accountable to you for our lives and our love.

Be with us as we gather and help us to boldly proclaim the ways we have shared your love, through the gifts you have given us.

Hear our songs, prayers, and silences as testimony of our stewardship.

And bless us as we worship – increase our strength and courage through this time, we pray. Amen.

Prayer of confession

All: You bestowed upon us many talents, and we confess we have often squandered them.

You gave us lands and seas, mountains and plains; and we confess we have polluted and allowed for their demise.

You gave us diversity in ethnicity, culture, and race; and we confess we have often used these to uphold and support division.

You gave us creatures and plants, flora and fauna beyond imagining; and we confess we have consumed and overtaken habitats, allowing whole species to disappear.

All: You gave us humanity in miraculous diversity.

We confess we have failed to invest in this beauty and celebrate it, and have allowed prejudice and judgment to create suffering for too many.

You entrusted us with so much, and yet we allowed our fears to overtake us and failed to bring new life in the abundance possible in your love.

All: Forgive us, Holy Wisdom, and teach us again how to trust in you, how to live in the hopeful knowledge that you will multiply our investments, and be with us all the ways.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Words of affirmation

As we turn to God in confession, God turns to us in investment. God offers us abundant life. Let us embrace it, celebrate it, multiply it, and rejoice. For God's investment in us never ends.

In this, let us be assured:

Your sins are forgiven.

ALL: Thanks be to God!

EARLY WORD

SHARING OUR STORIES

READINGS: Alison and John Davies

Psalm 123

1To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

2As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until he has mercy upon us.

3Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.

4Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

Matthew 25:14-30

14“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29For 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. 30As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

PREACHING – Abundant Possibilities.

(Show the image “contradiction”)



I expect that if any of us came upon this traffic sign, we would be somewhat flummoxed.

What should I do? Can I go in or not? What if I do go in? Can I do both at the same time? Where is a police officer when you need one?

A sign like this put before us can be mightily confusing, if not downright stress inducing.

It seems like a contradiction that cannot be resolved.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew I think is a bit like this sign.

As I read it and reflected on it, and remembered how I have thought about it in the past, and then read what different scholars were commenting on it, I found myself confronted with seemingly contradictory views on what this parable is about.

Now you might be saying to yourself quietly, "Oh Scott, Scott, Scott, with all your wonderful training, you can't figure this one out? Come on we all learnt this one in Sunday School."

Yes we did.

But did we learn it right?

I am guessing most of us are thinking it means something like make the most of your gift or talent that has been given to you, and don't bury it away.

Well, one can take that from this reading especially seeing most of us have heard it preached on that way for years and years.

But this may not actually be what this parable is about.

Unfortunately for us the word talent in the parable, which we all know is an amount of money in Jesus' day, is too easily transferred to mean ability or gift.

It is understandable.

One word which we overlay with modern meaning, can get us off the track somewhat, and take us away from the meaning of such passages, into places that may be well meaning, but are not the original meaning.

Now I am aware that there are those who claim that the original meaning is gone forever, we can never know it and some even suggest that it is irrelevant.

I am not one of those.

I like to have a crack at figuring out what the author meant, and then asking again and again what does it even mean for us?

So here is where I began to face that confusing traffic sign.

Clearly there were some voices advocating an allegorical look at the parable where the master represents God, and the message is pretty *much* "that each of us are entrusted with talents- resources, if you will, and the master gives them to us to use- not to bury".

It is fair to say however that this view is not supported by most scholars, although most say it is a worthy message for people to hear.

However, one scholar quite definitely says to would be preachers - *this is NOT a parable about us being the best we can be, no matter how much our culture of achievement wants to twist it into that.*

In short, PLEASE don't tell people that the message of this Sunday's gospel is anything along the lines of "make the most of the talents you've got," as its message is much closer to "care for those whom the world would leave destitute."

Ok, so I guess I won't be saying that.

So, what else might this parable be saying?

One commentator I read suggested that Matthew is very big on talking about the law and the prophets in his gospel, which is a standard recognised theme in Matthew. He went on to say that the "talents" represented the Torah, or God's Holy Law given to the people of Israel, and as such it should be used and disseminated as much as possible, not buried away to be left unused and unconsidered. This view was not mentioned by most commentators, but one worth at least hearing I think.

What else might the parable be telling us, or rather Jesus telling us through the parable?

There is a third view becoming more prevalent that I came across some years ago, that sees the parable in quite a different way.

It arises largely out of a concern of construing the master as representing God. *This third view asks us to imagine that this story is not about God being the master- in fact, to imagine that it's not an illustration about the Kingdom of God at all... but instead, that the master is a very wealthy landowner, just like the story says, and it is a story about the world people live in. He is wealthy beyond measure, and he leaves his three top employees a certain amount of his property to take care of while he goes on a trip- very literal- and he gives to them each a portion according to their power or status in his business.*

Now, if we read this story in context, it sits within a bunch of stories that all began with these words at the start of chapter 24 - As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ²Then he asked them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"

And then he launches into the stories.

When he mentioned a wealthy landowner, and the talent, an amount worth about 5 million dollars by today's standards, it would have been very clear to the disciples who the wealthy person represented. They would have known right away that Jesus

was speaking of the people who owned their homes, the ones who would raise taxes, the ones with the power to alter the laws, put constraints on their freedoms, and to keep them, and most other people, in a state of poverty.

When Jesus said that the master put his 3 top guys in charge, the disciples would have also known what that meant; that the three men would have orders to get the money multiplied in any way they saw fit- including putting even more pressure on the local, mostly poor, people. The system was corrupt, and the rich continued to get richer and the poor poorer.

So when the wealthy man comes back, the first two servants get rewarded for doing what they were charged to do... make money. The third servant, because he hid his talent, gets punished- he is cast out. But it is this third servant, in this version of the story, who might be called the hero. Because it is the third servant who saw what was going on.

The interesting thing is, that the third servant knew that risk going in. He was willing to risk being poor himself, to have to live among the oppressed, in order to not participate in the corruption. It was his ultimate sacrifice for the people.

So, in this interpretation, Jesus is giving the people an illustration of how the world is- and that sometimes we must be willing to risk and sacrifice our own comfort for the greater good- sometimes we have to take even one step against the system- not buy in- not condone the oppression around us. It's a social justice issue... It is as if Jesus says, "Listen, the way of the world is harsh and ugly and you should stand up to it. It will be hard, but it will be right."

Now not everyone agrees with this view.

I still find myself looking at that contradictory road sign.

So, what is it on about?

As usual Professor Bill Loader is a helpful guiding voice.

He offers that the parable is about money and what you can do with it and the amount of money given to the first servant would equate to something like \$5 million today, which is a huge amount of money then and now. So Matthew was apparently spinning quite a yarn. The listeners of this parable would know only too well what could be done with such an amount of money.

He goes on to say that this parable really piggy backs the previous one about the wise and foolish bridesmaids and their oil.

The first parable used the image of oil to light lamps. This parable uses the image of money and what it can achieve. Just as in the first parable the oil comes close to

being a description for the Spirit, so here the money is an image for what is potent in the kingdom and for the kingdom. It may also be seen as a way of talking about the Spirit or at least about the life of God within us. It is slightly missing the point to think it is talking about how we use our various natural abilities (talents in the modern sense). It has more to do with how we allow the life of God to flow through us - because it is powerful- like money!

Then Bill goes on to say this –

There is a sting in the tail of the parable. The person who refused to let the money work identifies his fears. The owner reaps where he has not sown and gathers harvest that was not originally his. A pretty good description of hard business practice in any age. Fear of being abandoned seems to motivate burying the talents. Matthew's community might think of the controversy over the expansion of the gospel into the Gentile world and the refusal of some Jews to accept that the doors should be flung open so recklessly. God is misbehaving again and they cannot believe it and refuse to support the adventure. In typically Matthean style the text promises only damnation for such lack of trust.

So it seems that what is coming under scrutiny here is well, the church and its inability to deal with the open inclusiveness of this misbehaving God, who in the very next parable, that's for next week, deals with the church according to how it treats those who are the lowest of the low.

In other words the church is given fair warning ...

...not to sit on the life of God in us. That is a variant on the Matthean theme of keeping the oil in supply, living from the life of God and not sitting back in complacency on the basis of status or, as here, not snuffing out the flame because our narrow values will not allow us to keep up with God's generosity.

If the modern use of talents has any relation to the text, it is at the level of allowing God's life to do its adventures with us and putting our talents (our natural abilities) at God's disposal.

The talents of the parable are really about God's life and power, not about our natural abilities. But the appropriate response is to allow God's investing hand to employ our abilities.

Where then does this leave us then in regard to the confusing traffic sign? Do we enter or not enter?

How do we interpret this parable?

I am a kind of both and person rather than an either or.

I reckon that if we take Bill Loader's view that the parable is about giving free reign to the life of God that flows in each of us and in our communities of faith, then the other interpretations of the parable will flow from that.

If we truly allow the life of God to flow freely in and through us then we will easily follow the laws of love, we will have no problems lifting up our talents for all to see and we will instinctively attend to matters of injustice wherever we see them.

Jan Richardson offers this:

This parable is a profound call to unhide ourselves...A lost coin, a lost sheep, a lost son; a bleeding woman seeking a surreptitious healing whom Jesus cannot allow to remain hidden; children whom the disciples seek to dismiss; gifts once enclosed in the earth that Jesus lifts up to point toward the kingdom of God: with constant persistence, Jesus—this incarnate God who took such visible and vulnerable flesh so that we might clearly see the love that God has for us—tugs at what has been hidden or missing or buried in order to show us how the presence of God shines through it.

And so we see this quality again in the gospel reading for this Sunday, in this parable told by the One who will not be content to let us hide what God has given to us, who urges us to uncover the treasure that God has placed within us, who calls us to show forth the presence of God in the way that only we can. (Jan Stephenson)

Sing – God who's giving knows no ending (to TIS 493)

God, whose giving knows no ending,
 from your rich and endless store--
 nature's wonder, Jesus' wisdom,
 costly cross, grave's shattered door--
 gifted by you, we turn to you,
 offering up ourselves in praise;
 thankful song shall rise forever,
 gracious Donor of our days.

Skills and time are ours for pressing
 toward the goals of Christ, your Son:
 all at peace in health and freedom,
 races joined, the Church made one.
 Now direct our daily labour,
 lest we strive for self alone.
 Born with talents, make us servants
 fit to answer at your throne.

Treasure, too, you have entrusted,
 gain through powers your grace conferred,
 ours to use for home and kindred,
 and to spread the gospel word.
 Open wide our hands in sharing,

as we heed Christ's ageless call,
healing, teaching, and reclaiming,
serving you by loving all.

Words: Robert L. Edwards. Words © 1961,

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE – read by Faye Green

Loving God, in your mercy, hear our prayers. And all these prayers we bring in the name of the Risen Christ who taught us to pray saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen**

Sing – A world of difference.

Verse 1

Will you dare to see the future
where peace and hope are real,
where nations stop their bickering
and hearts begin to heal?

Do you think that this will happen,
no matter what we do?

No! The future is impatient
and it's calling me and you!

Chorus

We can make a world of difference, it depends on you and me.

We can build a new tomorrow when we begin to see
that change is really possible, where we can live as one.

Let's make our world a better place, our dream has now begun!

Verse 2

We don't need a revolution
based on violence or greed,
where power hungry people
promote their selfish needs.
We need to change the way we act

and open wide our eyes
to see the new beginnings
as hope begins to rise.

Chorus

We can make a world of difference, it depends on you and me.
We can build a new tomorrow when we begin to see
that change is really possible, where we can live as one.
Let's make our world a better place, our dream has now begun!

Verse 3

Stay open to diversity,
stand up for what is right.
Be honest in the way you act,
keep truth within your sight.
Contribute to society,
be fair in all you do.
Consider other people and
respect their point of view.

Chorus

We can make a world of difference, it depends on you and me.
We can build a new tomorrow when we begin to see
that change is really possible, where we can live as one.
Let's make our world a better place, our dream has now begun!

BLESSING

Friends, go well, with and within
Currents, and blessing of Spirit.

Be of good courage,
and gentle of heart.
Be of wise mind,
and open to new instruction.
Be of vision,
not ignoring the obvious and pressing.
Be of simple faith,
yet radically open to questions and doubts.
Be free;
a generous healing and freedom for others.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Recessional – Sent by the Lord am I

Sent by the Lord am I;
My hands are ready now
To make the earth a place
In which the kingdom comes.
Sent by the Lord am I;

My hands are ready now
To make the earth a place
In which the kingdom comes.
The angels cannot change
A world of hurt and pain
Into a world of love,
Of justice and of peace.
The task is mine to do,
To set it really free.
O help me to obey,
Help me to do your will.