

*Sermon for the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 13.xi.2005, 10:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co., Pennsylvania
LBW 2 Ante-Communion Service
Zephaniah 1:7,12-18; Psalm 90:1-12; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30*

J. J.!

Grace to you and peace, from Him Who is and Who was and Who is to come! ✠ Amen.

"For [the Kingdom of Heaven] is as if a man, going on a journey . . ."

—Matthew 25:14



How do *you* react to this parable of the Kingdom of Heaven? /always think to myself, ‘Am I glad I don’t work for *that* employer. Look at what *high* expectations he has—that his employees would invest his money, at some risk, to give him a greater sum than that which he had left them! But he gives them no clear directive, no written expectations.’ And then I remember, that I *do* work for such a taskmaster—and, if you are baptized into Christ Jesus, so do *you!*

Are we able to understand this parable rightly? After all, Jesus lived in a day before banking. The farmers and craftsmen He grew up with would have hidden their money for safekeeping if they had to go on a journey, or done as the man in the parable did, entrusting it to a worthy

servant. It was a form of banking, I suppose. But as the interest banks pay on the hard-earned money we put into them seems to decrease, this parable of the Kingdom Our Lord tells may be more difficult for us to understand. However, we do deposit our money in savings accounts, or in interest-bearing checking accounts, with the expectation that our money will be not only safe in that bank vault, but that it will also earn interest, at least enough to keep up with the rate of inflation. Of course, we make sure the bank knows what we want done with our money, whether it is to be readily available for purchases and payments, or in a savings account which may easily be drawn on, or perhaps put away in a certificate of deposit that encourages us not to touch that money until it has earned as much interest as possible.

But the man of means in our story gives no such clear directive. He simply places the money in the hands of each of the three servants and leaves them free to do with it as they will. The fact that he does this shows that they were not just any servants, not simply slaves who had to be told to do everything. No, they were ‘stewards,’ servants or employees entrusted with responsibility over some particular part of the running of their employer’s estate or other business.

They were *trusted members of the household*, in much the same way we want our children to be by the time they are ready to learn a trade or study for a profession. Ordinarily, parental encouragement and material help toward completing an education is given without explicit expectations, the only one being that the student will make the best use of the opportunity so that they may be self-sufficient and be able to find their own way in life. Most parents who love their children and want to see their gifts developed to the utmost do not place limitations on the children as to what they will study or as to where they will live and work when they have completed their studies. Such a gift gives the young man or woman *permission* to develop intellectually as well as morally and physically into the best person they can become, making the greatest possible contribution to the world and to the family they themselves may establish. Freedom that comes with permission like that brings with it a powerful expectation, one to which not everyone lives up.

According to the parable of the Kingdom in today's Gospel, God the Benefactor does not expect all efforts at using the grace He gives us, at investing it in our own lives and the lives of others to be spectacular. Even the steward whose investment of the original two talents of money he had been given had yielded but two more talents was cause for delight. After

all, it was a 100% return on the investment of trust the Master had made in him. But the steward whom feared his Master but did not trust *him* is finally the one for whom the Benefactor's wrath has no limits. He is the little man who just wanted to *survive*, to not *lose* what the Master had given him by not using it at all. He had not believed in the Master's implicit *permission* to take a risk in using the small amount with which he had been entrusted.

We the baptized have received such a gift, and we receive it each time we hear God's Word in Scripture or welcome Christ into our lives in Holy Communion. And we are given this grace by One Who, beginning with Holy Baptism, tells us and shows us through the preaching of the Gospel and the love of the Christian fellowship that our God is a God Who loves us without limit, that everything God gives us comes to us from God's hand with love. God, the Benefactor, does not tell us precisely what to do with the gift of His saving grace, with the forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation in Christ, except that, in the great prayer Our Lord gave us, we ask for that gift only in proportion to the way we give it to others: ". . . and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." God the Creator gives the whole universe freedom to be, to develop according to the laws which bear the imprint of God's sheer love, the unmistakable will

that something, rather than nothing, should be. According to the witness of Genesis, God gives the one creature capable of understanding and of thinking of the creation as a whole the *permission* to care for the part of creation within our experience, that is the earth and all the life on it.

In the disturbance of the earth through pollution and unrestrained exploitation of natural resources we see and must live with the consequences of doing precisely *nothing* to care for the gift of the earth with which we have been entrusted. In lives turned in on themselves in bitterness, and in children and grandchildren who can see no joy in living the faith of their Baptism in the Church which seems to have little meaning for their own parents and grandparents, we see and must live with the result of doing *nothing* with the precious means of grace we have been given in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ! In simply clinging to what material assets may remain in a congregation, afraid to risk the blessings we have received from previous generations so that future generations may meet the Risen Christ in His Church, we see congregations withering on the vine of God's kingdom, like dried remnants of the grapes of the harvest which even the birds do not want.

We have God's *permission* to use what we have been given to whatever extent we can to extend the community of those who know a loving God and who know that love in one another. We have God's permission to *try*. We even have God's permission to *fail*—and *if* we fail, let us make it a glorious failure, a *spectacular flop* in the attempt to be the Church of Jesus Christ in this time and in this place! There is a little book sitting on the showcase in the back of the church which talks about this, about not only Christ's 'Great Commission' as we hear that at the end of Saint Matthew's Gospel, but about the 'Great *Permission*' to use what we have as individual households and as a congregation to do the work of the kingdom. This is a different way of thinking to what we are used to. In our households, we try to spend wisely and then to brace ourselves when the bills come in. We do the same thing in the Congregation, but this is not what God expects of us. We are expected to look for ways to use what we have both to welcome others into our congregation and to extend the Kingdom of God's love throughout our community, *in partnership with other Christian congregations*, so that Christ will be served in men, women and children in need of sustenance, in need of good counsel and encouragement, in need of love.

In order to get us to think this way and to act this way, our Stewardship Committee succeeded in getting the Congregation Council to include \$500 in 'seed money' for each key committee and organization in this church. To date, only two committees have drawn on that money from the 2005 budget. I pray that we try this again in 2006, and that this time the 'penny drops,' so to speak, i.e., that our working committees and organizations get the idea that they could use this money either on their own or in cooperation with others in our congregation or with committees and groups of other congregations to do 'something beautiful for God,' as Mother Teresa of Calcutta used to say of her sisters' service to the dying gathered up from the streets of Calcutta. Our Stewardship Committee is also asking each one of us to *think ahead*, as we look out on what God is calling us to do as His Church in 2006, and to accept the responsibility that comes with being both *permitted and called* to support the work and the continued ministry of this Congregation in the New Year. That permission *is* our calling. Doing *nothing* is not an option. What *trust*, what *confidence* does God our Master place in us! We must be special servants, genuine *stewards* indeed! ✠ Amen.



Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. ✠ Amen.

S. D. G.!