24th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 90, 1 Thess. 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Nov. 15, 2020

If you asked an assortment of pastors to name their five **least** favorite texts for preaching, our Gospel text from Matthew 25 would probably make most everyone's list. It is **such** a challenging text, for **so** many reasons…

For one thing, there's the whole problem of the main characters, who, in the parable of the talents, consist of a **master** and **his slaves**, with no critique whatsoever of the master's privileged status or of the unjust economic system by which one class of people profits through the hard work and ingenuity of another…

And then of course there is the cruel treatment of the slave who failed to make a profit from the one talent entrusted to him by his master… a seemingly extreme and heartless reaction **made even worse** when you realize that Matthew is equating the slave's banishment to the outer darkness **at the end of the story** with the banishment of those **at the end of the age** who have similarly failed, on behalf of the kingdom of heaven, to make a profit from the resources entrusted to them…

That reckoning coming, according to Matthew, when the "Son of Man" would finally arrive to inaugurate the final victory of good over evil… The day Matthew and his early Christian community in the late first century would have thought of in terms of the "second coming of Christ," which they expected to come any minute… (that "great day of reckoning," as referenced in our Gospel text for this morning, hardly being the way we might like to imagine it, especially if we recognize in the fearful slave our own reticence for taking risks).

It is a very challenging text in its own right, made even more difficult to "mine" for the "treasure at its center" by virtue of the many preachers and Bible study leaders who have settled for a "moralistic" interpretation of the parable, suggesting that being a "good" Christian, worthy of entrance into the fullness of God's kingdom at the end of time, requires creative and fulsome investment strategies on behalf of that kingdom **now…** (in keeping with the first two slaves in the story)… and warning the timid among us of what might happen on judgement day to those whose fears have gotten in the way…

I myself have preached such moralistic versions of this text; one year, I'm hesitant to admit, even tying it to a capital campaign effort at Redeemer Lutheran Church to raise money for an addition to our building. My sermon on this text from Matthew 25 that year involving my "gifting" of everyone in the congregation with four cents (big spender that I am), along with

an “invitation” to think how they might "grow” those four cents in support of our capital campaign…

A challenge 8 year-old Megan Reymore took very seriously, writing this for our church newsletter a month later…

When Pastor Elaine handed me four cents a few weeks ago, I had trouble thinking of how I could use it to help add to the church building fund. I thought about it often since that day and asked mom a lot of questions about ideas. I really wanted to help. We came up with the idea of making marble bags because I was needing one myself, since I had just gotten my own marbles, and had no good place to keep them.

The rest of my family thought it was such a good idea that they donated each of their four cents to my starter money. So then I had sixteen cents, and plans to search the house, school and school bus for any stray coins. I figured any money I might find I would add to this change, which I would then use to buy fabric paint that I would decorate the bags with.

Mom has donated fabric, thread, ribbon ties, pins and needles. I know how to sew by hand and have already made the first marble bag. I plan to sell them at Redeemer’s Fall Festival on November 7 for $1.00 each, and then maybe put them in some local toy or gift stores. Call me if you would like to buy one of “Megan’s Marble Bags!” All profits will be given to Redeemer’s Building Fund.

P.S. I’m having LOTS of fun doing this! Have you decided what YOU are going to do with YOUR FOUR CENTS??? Signed, Megan Reymore, (8 years old).

Okay. I will admit that it’s a cute story. And putting aside the sneaky and ***unscrupulous*** way I used Matthew 25 to enhance the capital campaign at Redeemer Lutheran Church that year, there’s nothing **wrong** with interpreting the parable of the talents as a call to invest all of our creative energies and passions into efforts on behalf of the kingdom of heaven… (that kingdom, as described in the verses following our Gospel text for this morning, being synonymous with feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner).

Of course there’s nothing **wrong** with interpreting the parable of the talents as a call to invest all of our creative energies and passions into efforts on behalf of such love and justice…

It’s just that it doesn’t often go deeper than the surface kind of interpretation that makes entrance into the kingdom of heaven seem like a **reward** for smart investment and sound resourceful decisions … It doesn’t open up the possibility of mining the parable all the way to its most brilliant, fiery and transformative center where we begin to sense something else on the move…

Something I can best speak of by going by way of the Sedgwick Elementary School gymnasium and the story of what happened the morning after our beloved special education teacher Marta Harrington unexpectedly died… Marta, whom many of you may remember, as she lived just down the road from St. Brendan for many years…

So, as background information, let me just remind you that Sedgwick, Maine has many families who live very close to the bone. Poverty is a real issue there, along with food scarcity and limited access to the resources necessary for a life of health and well-being.

Let me also tell you that Marta was one of those teachers who could work magic with kids no matter their circumstances or challenges; even the kids other teachers couldn't reach… She was beloved by both students and staff…

And so, on the morning after her death, the principal called everyone in the school into the gymnasium. He had us all form a huge circle. He told us that Marta had died of a heart attack the night before, and acknowledged that we would all miss her very much…

And then he said that in memory of Marta and the way she had given herself so fully to her students and her colleagues alike, we would do the Hokey-Pokey, **putting our whole selves in,** in thanksgiving for the way Marta had taught us to do the same…

And the thing is, as we put our whole selves in, coming closer to one another in the process, extending our hands and our hearts toward one another, I looked up and saw the third grade boy whose father had recently died in a fishing accident and the janitor who was battling cancer…

As we put our whole selves in, I looked up and saw the two hardscrabble kids who, during the annual talent show one year, had stood up in front of the whole school in their mismatched clothes and sung acapella, "What if God is one of us, just a slob like one of us, trying to find his way home?"

As we put our whole selves in, I looked up and saw, across the dividing lines of rich and poor, young and old, school cook and principal, people from here and people from away, the presence of something that connected all of us… something that held us all in a single space, a single embrace… **not dependent upon anything noble or moral or resourceful we had done, but simply there with us because, as our faith tells us, the constellation of God's love is always present in our midst, longing for us to recognize it moving around us and between us and within us…**

God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven… made visible and tangible and visceral and incarnate whenever we put our whole selves in… our whole selves in… reaching toward one another, extending our whole selves toward one another in our shared need for relationship and connection… in our shared circumstance of vulnerability and loss; in our shared **irrational**

hope that even in the valley of the shadow of death there might be the presence of something else… something for which there is no name save "love"…

(Mind you, we were in the midst of death as we did the Hokey Pokey that morning… We were in the midst of an ending moment none of us were prepared for)… But, in the midst of all of that, as we put our whole selves in, I know I saw it… I saw the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven… there… in the Sedgwick Elementary School Gymnasium… all of us included…

Forever reminding me that our inclusion in God's kingdom is not a **reward** for putting our whole selves in, but a **result** of "putting our whole selves in." (Like knowing how to tango is the result of taking tango lessons and being clean in the result of taking a bath)… **Because how we get there is where we'll arrive.**

Ask Scrooge, and he will tell you this is so… Ask Marta Harrington and she will tell you this is so… Ask the Velveteen Rabbit… Ask 8-year-old Megan Reymore who, as she said, just loved making those marble bags… Ask Jesus… Ask the children and the staff at the Sedgwick Elementary School who gathered in the gymnasium that day to "put their whole selves in", and they will tell you this is so…

Inclusion in the kingdom of heaven is not a **reward**… it's the **result** of putting our whole selves in and **seeing** in that fullness of **being** what lives and moves and sings and burns at the heart of our faith… the very same brilliant, fiery and transformative "something" that moves and sings and burns at the center of Matthew's parable of the talents…

The gift free for the taking … the pearl of great price… the talents given to the three slaves in the first place, which in today's currency would be worth, respectively, $2,700,000.00, $1,080,000.00 and $540,000… currencies so **shocking** in their abundance and extravagance and utter "free-ness" the only possible response could be to put one's whole self in…

This is the heart of the parable Matthew's Jesus told the disciples, and Matthew told his late first century community, and now tells us, despite our constant temptation to make of it a story about two guys who did it "right" and one who did it "wrong." **It's not about that**….

It's a story about the gift freely and extravagantly given… It's a story about the very thing made visible and tangible and incarnate in the Sedgwick Elementary School gymnasium that day, when in the midst of death, we put our whole selves in, and in so doing, participated in God's kingdom come on earth as it in in heaven… **the gift already given and still in the making, longing for us to see it and be it in the world God so loves…**

"Put your whole selves in," Matthew told his community as they anticipated the imminent end of the world as they knew it, and with it the dawning of the kingdom of God… "Put your whole self in," Matthew tells us in the midst of the myriad endings that seem to surround us in every direction…

Goodness knows, this is not easy… Not easy to put our whole selves in when we may feel more like curling up into a little ball in fear and trepidation as Covid looms, and animosity divides, and climate change threatens and anxieties rise like monsters in the shadows of the night… Not easy when we may already feel as if we are in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth…

But hear this, dear brothers and sisters in Christ… The parable of the talents as told in Matthew, with its challenging and frightening depictions of a passionate and fiery God**, who will settle for nothing less than love,** is a story about a God who comes into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, and there, to find us…

There to say, as in the closing words of Matthew's Gospel, "Lo, I am with you, even to end of the age… I am Emmanuel, God with you… Doing the Hokey Pokey, putting my whole self in + for the sake of love, and inviting you to do the same…

The very God who invites us, calls us to **see** and **be** that love in places as far flung as an elementary school gymnasium in a little Podunk town at the edge of the world… Where, along with the school cook and the principal, the janitor battling cancer and the third grade boy whose father drowned in a fishing accident, we put our whole selves in, even in the shadow of death…

And **there** marvel at the constellation of love that connects us all… the love that holds us all… There, in that most unlikely of places, recognizing the gift given, the pearl of great price, the talents beyond all imagining… the Love that says "Be not afraid… Put your whole self into the dawning of God's kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven…

"Practice heaven, and it will come… by the power of God's fierce and tender love, and in the strong sure name of Jesus."