



*Saved to Serve*

*I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30*

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First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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This last week I shared Jesus' parable that we read a few minutes ago (Matthew 15: 14-30) with two different groups. The first was our Executive Board as part of a mediation. I asked them to think about three questions as they heard the parable; What does it tell us about God? What does it tell us about God's Kingdom, and What does it tell us about what God wants us to do? Well, the silence was deafening before one brave soul spoke up; "I don't like this parable." The others nodded in agreement.

And then the next day I shared the parable with a bible study at Lutheran Hillside Village. After we unpacked the parable and tied it to our epistle lessons (I Thessalonians) some spoke up and said that they just cannot get beyond the unfairness of the parable. The Master treated each one differently. A thought suddenly came to me, one that I had never had before. I asked if she had children. She did. I asked what the age difference was between her children. It ranged between 2 and 5 years. I then asked if they all had the same bed time. They didn't. Wasn't that unfair, I asked. Well, no, because the youngest one needed more sleep. Then turning to the parable I reminded the group of verse 15 in the gospel lesson. The Master gave to each servant a number of talents equal to their ability.

The Master knew the servants. He knew how much they could handle. He didn't give them more than they could handle because the Master did not want them to fail. The parable isn't about "talent" as in being able to shoot a basketball nor is it about money, though a "talent" at that time was a measure of money. Money or talent was simply the metaphor kind of like when someone tells us that our checkbook is a barometer of what we really value.

I do not believe that it is by accident that the lectionary tied this parable and our epistle together. In order to understand the epistle lesson we must first unlock the gospel lesson. The point of this gospel lesson, which is the second of three consecutive "judgment parables" in Matthew, is that there are consequences to our decisions. God gives us opportunities to do the work of the Kingdom and if we refuse to do them, if we bury the opportunity because we are afraid that we may fail, God will perform spiritual bypass surgery and find someone else to do the work. We, on the other hand, will be left in outer darkness. We will no longer be relevant. God is not about "playing it safe". God is more interested in risking ourselves in doing the work of the Kingdom. God is more interested in a faith that trusts God even when there is no proof that such trust is well founded.

While I was on sabbatical I read a book by John Ortberg entitled *When the Game Is Over, the Pieces All Go Back in the Box*. The metaphor that ties every chapter together is the life lesson that he

learned from his grandmother as they played Monopoly. She was an excellent Monopoly and won every game, until one day, when John won. As he was “high-fiving” and “spiking” the little race car his grandmother was putting the game back in the box. Finally she said, “Remember, Johnny, when the game is over, the pieces all go back in the box.” And so it is with life.

Against the backdrop of Eternity our time in this reality is less than a blink of an eye. But while we are here, God gives us various opportunities to do the Kingdom’s work. At another time and place Jesus said that those who would take him seriously are like a light shining in the dark. Do not hide your light, he said. Do not bury your talent.

And this brings us to the epistle lesson. It comes toward the end of Paul’s letter to the church in Thessalonica. It comes as words of encouragement. *“Beloved, you are not in darkness ... you are children of the light and children of the day ... so then, let us not fall asleep as others do ... since we belong to the day, let us be diligent and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation ... Therefore, encourage one another, build each other up, for the glory of God. Amen.”*