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Preached on November 19, 2023  
Church of the Resurrection, Alexandria, VA

**Year A**

Proper 28, Track 2  
Zephaniah 1:7,12-18  
Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12  
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Matthew 25:14-30

In the 1970s, a phrase appeared on bumper stickers and t-shirts. **Jesus is coming...look busy.** The phrase-**Jesus is coming...look busy**-reminded us that we were supposed to be doing the work that Jesus tasked us, his disciples to do—and that we were falling down on the job. As we get close to the end of Jesus' discourse (almost and not yet), Jesus is making certain that the disciples understand that we are not to only look busy, but to actually do the work that he invites us into. Jesus keeps giving us a clear picture of what our call to discipleship is to be about.

If you've ever been with someone preparing for their final days on earth, perhaps we have a glimpse of how Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for the coming confrontation with the authorities that leads to his death. Jesus wants to be sure that they understand what they and we are called to do.

However, if we interpret today's gospel as a one-for-one comparison as we have interpreted the other parables, this one is very disturbing. Where is the merciful, loving God that Jesus has been teaching about? The third slave's description of the man sounds right on the mark to me. And the master doesn't dispute the fact that he is harsh or that he gains his wealth through means forbidden in Exodus and Leviticus. He seems proud that he reaps what he doesn't work for. That man not only doesn't seem to have any of the characteristics Jesus teaches his disciples to have, but he also is quite the opposite and without mercy. He punishes the slave who doesn't act the way he's seen his master act. It is also inconceivable to me that the parable is about a command to gather up more treasure.

In fact, on its surface, Jesus is telling a story that doesn't sound like a very motivating or helpful parable for the disciples or for us.

We may have heard the interpretation that Jesus is telling us to use our talents and they will multiply. That we shouldn't bury the skills we have, the gifts we bring to the table. In preparing for today, even that explanation wasn't sitting well with me. I seriously doubt that Jesus was telling us that God will be angry and toss us where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth if we choose not to focus on ways to grow our money that don't involve our own labor or even that God will condemn us if we don't use our skills in the church.

I invite you to dig more deeply with me. Let's first look at the worth of a talent. A talent is equal to roughly equivalent to 20 years wages for the average worker. Five talents, the largest amount entrusted to any of the servants, is comparable to one hundred years' worth of labor, an astronomical amount of money. It would be as if Melinda French Gates or Jeff Bezos gave one of us their money to take care of. Any of us would consider that amount of money a treasure.

In his last days before he approaches his death, Jesus is entrusting a treasure to his disciples and to us. By the time we get to today's parable, Jesus has been teaching the disciples and us about the kingdom and what it looks like. Matthew often pictures the disciples as being dense—not understanding what Jesus is teaching them. You may recall that they sometimes tell Jesus outright that they don't understand what he is talking about. They ask for an explanation of what Jesus means by the story—remember the Sower and the seed. Perhaps, like any good teacher, Jesus is trying one more time, one more way to make it clear what the disciples are to do, what we are to do with the treasure of the Good News. How are we to care for the kingdom of God? Are we to bury the treasure and not take the risks that come from openly sharing with the Good News with others?

The Thessalonians may have felt like they needed to do that. They might have felt that the Roman empires offer of peace and security was more comforting, less risky, than sharing the Good News of Jesus with those around them. As they waited for Jesus' return, at a very difficult time in the empire, they begin to question their own understanding of what it means to wait for Jesus without knowing when he would return. Paul acknowledges their collective risks of being followers of Jesus and reminds them that their safety and security come from the light of Christ. He calls them, as a community to live a sustaining life of faith, love, and hope of salvation. Paul reminds them that God is not wrathful and that they are called to live in Christ, but to share the saving grace of God's mercy and love with others no matter what the cost is.

With this parable, Jesus has continued to teach us, to remind us that we are called to act as he does, to be carry out his ministry. I want to be clear—we are not slaves to God—that is not the message of the parable. We are to be faithful proclaimers of the Good News through our words and through our actions. We This work is risky and not to be buried so that it can be ignored or stagnate. As a community, we are called to open our hearts and welcome those whom Jesus welcomed—the outcasts, the strangers, the oppressed. If like the third slave in the parable, we bury or hold on to the Good News only for ourselves, and do not take the risks inherent in being a follower of Jesus, we and the world around us will remain bound to the darkness and oppression of economic and racial injustice.

Jesus calls us, invites us, to do the work that he has taught us to do. Treasure that invitation to grow the kingdom of God here and now. Jesus calls us to recognize and be among the poor in spirit. Jesus calls us to be peacemakers and to work for justice, even when it comes with great cost. Jesus calls us to be healers, sharing God's love with everyone who crosses our paths. Jesus calls us to comfort for those who mourn. Jesus calls us to confront the empire that keeps us all in bondage, using power to separate us from each other.

My siblings in Christ, encourage one another to carry out the work of the Gospel. Know that complacency, fear, and the avoidance of working for justice are not options that Jesus gives us. Jesus is coming...and Jesus is here, through our work as bearers and proclaimers of the Good News of God's love. Jesus is coming and is here through our actions as followers of Jesus' example.

That's far too many words for bumper sticker, so inscribe it on your heart, in your prayers, and through your actions. Act in and through the invitation to be in the world as Jesus is bringing hope to the world by sharing the love and mercy of God to each and every one of God's people and all of creation.