

“There”

Is Now!

November 8, 2020

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost /Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday – The Shout at Midnight

[Matthew 25:1-13](#)

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Reign of Christ / Thanksgiving Sunday – In Christ’s Glory

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Yes, it's asking a lot; but remember how this liturgical year started? It began December 1, 2019. Wow, can you even recall the world in 2019? It seems a different reality, another dimension of time and space.

Advent, Year A, we began by asking, "Are We There Yet?" It was a take on the irritating back seat question we've all heard or said, a reminder that while the journey might be long, we are headed someplace. Advent is a call to be looking forward to completion, to the coming kin-dom; and our anticipation leads us to ask, "Are we there yet?"

Here at the end of the liturgical year, we claim the present reality. We claim the reign of Christ; we claim the indwelling Spirit; we claim the presence of our Lord. The "there" we were looking for is here, now. So, "*There is Now*" is our theme for these last weeks of the season. Our guide for this experience is the amazing twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. In this chapter is a unique presentation of the coming kin-dom of God and what it means to be a part of it. In the run up to Reign of Christ Sunday or what many call Christ the King Sunday, we examine what living under the reign of Christ means, not just for the *someday of fulfillment* but for today, as we are now and not yet a part of that kin-dom. The "there" of the kin-dom becomes the "now" of our living out the call each and every day.

November 8, 2020

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost /Organ and Tissue Donor Sunday –
The Shout at Midnight

[Matthew 25:1-13](#)

INTRODUCTION

Let's start with a word about words—or perhaps better, a word about language. How we talk about God matters. The words we choose, the images we create in people's minds, the gendered pronouns we pick shape interpretation and accessibility of God for those who hear. This isn't simply a matter of being "politically correct" or fashionable; this is about realizing how language shapes

understanding. God is beyond language, above our attempts to codify and diminish and capture into words that fit our experience. So, let's be as broad and open as we can when it comes to describing God. Let's follow the biblical example and use a variety of images and words that give glimpses and hints, partial pictures of the whole that is our God.

This isn't the space for a full discussion of these issues, but we raise it in order to talk about one word in particular: "Kingdom" is a word that is used in this first parable of Matthew 25, but it also is behind the other two stories in this chapter. While many use the word "kingdom" with no hesitation, we understand that there are those for whom the word is both outdated and even oppressive. It speaks of a patriarchal past rather than an inclusive future. In a people-governed world, whether in reality or in the ideal, a kingdom is a concept that turns people away rather than draws them in.

Like many in the faith, the Worship Team here at Discipleship Ministries has adopted the term "kin-dom" as an appropriate substitute. While not in common usage, "kin-dom" captures something of the original word and yet stretches us to see a new relationship with God and one another described by the concept itself. It may seem cumbersome to you to use such a term, but it has the potential of opening doors and minds to wider understandings.

Some will continue to use the more familiar and biblical word "kingdom"; it is an insider word that still speaks within the context of the communication familiar with Christian code language. We recommend an occasional challenge, however. Worship is supposed to pull us out of our safety zone to embrace more of the fullness of God and the possibilities inherent in the faith. Whatever the choice made, be assured that words matter.

The thrust of the service, here in the penultimate month of the calendar year, is preparedness. Are we listening for the shout at midnight? For the cry of the one who comes? The bridegroom who comes to gather us up? Not to take us away to a different realm, but to live fully in this one. The shout at midnight is the recognition that God is at work among us. Where do we see that presence? How do we experience the presence of our Lord as we go about our daily lives? This worship experience is both an inspiration to live each day aware of that presence and to acknowledge that all of us are closer to the one we follow than we realize.

So, let our songs speak of the nearness of Christ, the comforting yet challenging presence that inspires us to keep our lamps burning with the oil of kindness and service in his name. Let the liturgy speak of the work of the people (which is what the word “liturgy” means, you know), the labors that bring light into the darkness of a world stumbling to find its way toward the kin-dom that we proclaim and seek to live each day. Let our testimony speak of catching a glimpse of the Lord as we keep watch over our lives and our communities, as we work for justice in small and transformative ways.

This is also Organ and Tissue Donation Sunday. Perhaps you have a habit of acknowledging this day; if so, we encourage you to continue. If you do not, then perhaps this year is the year to consider doing so. This worship series is about looking for, responding to, and working with the Christ who is present. It could be argued that signing up for organ donation is a way of making yourself available to be used for the purposes of life, even at the moment of death. It need not be a central focus of the service, but in a list of ways to respond to the shout at midnight, offering all of yourself is one way to be ready.

PREACHING NOTES

“Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burning” is a spiritual based on Matthew 25:1-13. Like most spirituals, it has an uncertain history; but it certainly can be traced back through various blues singers and recordings into the slave experience where it was used as a work song, but also a way of hoping for something better. It was a flame around which an oppressed community gathered to keep their spirits warm and have a sense of place in a dark and scary world of pain and suffering. It was a simple song, sung by workers able to keep their minds on their tasks and yet be transported into another reality, another kingdom.

Keep your lamps trimmed and burning / keep your lamps trimmed and burning / keep your lamps trimmed and burning / See what the Lord has done.

Actually, there is some divergence on that last line. The oldest recording of the song ends with “See what the Lord has done.” It was sung by Blind Willie Johnson, a popular blues singer of the early twentieth century. His plaintive tenor voice

seemed to be calling us to pay attention to what God is doing among us every moment of the day. It was a call to keep awake, as Jesus tells us. But the call was not simply for what is not yet here, but what surrounds us already.

A few years later, the Rev. Gary Davis, another blues singer and preacher, recorded the song and changed the last line to “*for the world’s about to end.*” Rev. Gary was singing a warning about the coming kingdom, that the promised return of our Lord is on the horizon. He wanted to remind us that what we see and what we experience, for good or for ill, is not all there is. There is more, something more, another world, another reality into which we lean, even as we live and work in this reality. There is a destination to our history, a culmination of all that we are becoming. It doesn’t have to be a threat; it could be a promise, a hope. One can imagine a slave singing of another world, knowing that the scars he bore did not define him; the chains he wore did not determine the shape of his life; the name he was given to live in the white man’s world wasn’t the name written in the book of life for him. And one day, one blessed day, the tears would end and life, promised abundant life, would begin.

Some of the oldest reports of this song being sung in the fields have yet another ending to the verse. *Keep your lamps trimmed and burning / for the work is almost done.* The work. Or sometimes your work. Your work is almost done. Soon I can lay down this hoe; soon I can set aside this shovel, lay down my pen, and enter into the blessed rest of the savior. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning.

Sometimes it seems Jesus tells a story just to confuse us. It’s like he wants us to work on something, to work out something. We’d rather he would just hand it out on a silver platter, wrapped up in an easily opened package that makes things easy for us. But no, a story, about . . . what? Weddings and lamps and oil and an odd celebration of selfishness? Something is not right here.

Of all the images Jesus uses to help us grab hold of the kin-dom of God or of the kin-dom of heaven, which is Matthew’s preference, this is the only one where the future tense is used. The kin-dom *will* be like this. Why is that? Aren’t the others future-oriented too? Well, yes and no. There is something unique about this one. Perhaps if we heard entering the kin-dom of heaven will be like this, we might understand the whole story a little bit better. The approach of the kin-dom of Heaven will be like this.

Jesus loved weddings. He used the image for talking about the kin-dom often. Jesus often spoke about parties and feasts and especially weddings. Because something special is happening there— a binding, a connecting, a covenant, and a vow. And a whopping great party. What better description is there for this new world, this new life? A party of inclusion and invitation. Y'all come. Right?

Why then the lamps? Why then wise and foolish? And aren't we supposed to share, even when we don't have enough ourselves? Isn't that what we're supposed to do? Why do we call the ones who won't share wise? OK, every metaphor has its limits. Or rather we're victims of crashing metaphors in this story. Go back to the Sermon on the Mount, on the other end of Matthew's Gospel. "You are the light of the world . . . let your light so shine before others, so that they may see your light and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:14-16). Remember? The light, the lamp, is not just an object of illumination; it represents a life of service and sacrifice. It represents a life transformed by faith in Jesus, by the grace of God. The wise bridesmaids lived a life of preparing for the Bridegroom; the foolish ones thought it didn't matter until the last minute. When he finally arrives, they have nothing to show that they belong to him, nothing to shine as a way of living and giving and caring and hoping. He says, "I don't know you."

Remember, unlike the Sermon on the Mount, which is for everyone, this is insider talk in chapter 25. This is the sign that you've been paying attention. This is for those who said yes some time ago and now they need to show a "yes-worthy" life. The wise bridesmaids didn't share their oil because they couldn't. You can't share acts of love. Each has to do her own. Each has to participate according to the grace given her, to use the gifts received. I can't ride your coattails into the kin-dom; you can't let my lamp light your way. That's just not how it works. Certainly, we can share; certainly, we can teach and mentor; and certainly, we are better together than any of us is alone. But in the end, we have to trim our own lamps; we have to burn our own oil. That is the work — the work that is almost done. We listen for the shout at midnight that will recognize Christ among us. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning; the work is almost done. Thanks be to God.

November 15, 2020

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Enter into the Joy

[Matthew 25:14-30](#)

INTRODUCTION

There is some deep water here this week, depending on how the worship team chooses to address this familiar story. The gospel challenges our easy understandings on a consistent basis; this whole series is likely to do that to some. Certainly, a more traditional interpretation of the parable would be easier, but it could also lead to the idea that what God wants is for us to produce more and more. How do we counter the “prosperity gospel” in this text? Turn talents into abilities and not money is one way. But how do our abilities produce more? What should we be celebrating this week in the life of the community as we gather for worship? Like many organizations in our culture, we seem to want to celebrate the successful. But what about those just getting by, those who protect every coin with a tight grip? Aren’t they worth celebrating, worth entering into the joy of the Master? If not the earthly masters, then the one who calls us into joy in this life and the next is the one we choose to follow.

There is no entry fee to the kin-dom. Your net worth has nothing to do with your eternal value. This is our proclamation for today. This is our invitation to the people of God. You were chosen not for your ability to earn, but because you are loved. And because you are loved, you have an ever-increasing capacity to love in return. That’s what expands; that’s what multiplies as we continue our journey to become disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. And then we find ourselves making disciples, even as we are being made disciples.

This is a vital message today. In an era of division and hatred based on external factors such as race and ethnicity, the proclamation that every person has an inherent worth is radical and life changing, world changing. So, how might you celebrate this inherent worth? Find the folks on the margins and bring them to the center. Let the children speak; hear from those of different origins; pray in different languages; testify to an immigrant experience. When it is one of the family of God who speaks, it sounds different from a news report or a social media post. Commit to pray for those without resources, those nearby or far off

who live hand to mouth, even one paycheck away from despair. You might even find these folks sitting beside you in the pew or logging on with you as you watch worship online.

Don't let the parable of the talents become a way of celebrating those who have much. Hear that verse, Matthew 25:29, saying this is how the world works, not how we work. Or perhaps, those who have more grace will be given more, and those who have no grace have no hope in the kin-dom of the Lord. Those who have the capacity to give will have even more opportunities to give, and those who choose not to give will lose those opportunities. However you interpret this verse or this parable, let it not be a point of division. Let it not affirm the cultural understanding that only the wealthy are blessed in this life.

With a title like "Enter the Joy," this service needs to be a celebration full of life and hope. Let the music be uplifting; let the liturgy be a call to joy and the celebration of life in Christ. Let the images be of acceptance and welcome, of inclusion and fellowship. If you're projecting or online, let the bumper images be of a recent meal or fellowship event at the church. Use pictures of the children enjoying Sunday school or Bible study, even if you did those online this year. Ask parents to provide images of their kids at worship at home. Remember, however, not to publish these photos on the website; and if streaming, don't use children's images with their faces clearly visible.

In every gospel message, there is a call. But let it be a call to joy, not to shame or to heaviness. Let it be a call to the possibilities of transformation and growth. Invite the community to more— more love, more joy, more fellowship, and connection. Be sure and provide a list of ways to connect, to dive deeper into the mission and ministry of the church. Invite all to enter into the joy.

PREACHING NOTES

"For it was as if . . ." That's how this story begins. Jesus told an "as if" story tucked away in the midst of a lot of other stories, and it has puzzled us to no end. It seems different from his usual story. And you can't help but wonder if we've missed it all these years and if we've been emphasizing the wrong things—not seeing it as radical as it really is or as challenging as it really is. Maybe we have

been domesticating the story into something more like worldly wisdom: “Do your best with what you have, and you’ll get rewarded.” When in fact, the story was trying to say something much more edgy, much riskier. You have to wonder.

You know that story. The parable of the talents, we call it. It is one of those interesting linguistic things that the Greek word for the unit of money used in the story has now become our word for abilities or gifts: Talent / *Talenta* was a large sum of money. (No, larger than that. Larger than you are thinking.) It was an almost unthinkable sum of money. It is hard to translate into modern amounts. Most commentators settle for years instead of amount. It is equivalent, they will calculate, to fifteen years of labor. If you worked at your job for fifteen years - and didn’t spend anything - at the end, you would have a talent. Fifteen years.

You load sixteen tons, what do you get / Another day older and deeper in debt / Saint Peter don't you call me / 'cause I can't go / I owe my soul to the company store. Tennessee Ernie Ford. Remember that song? Fifteen, sixteen— an impossible number when it comes to labor, when it comes to money. Yet, in the story, there are three slaves (slaves, mind you) handed fifteen, thirty, or seventy-five years’ worth of wages and told . . . *well, what are they told?* Nothing. Not a thing. He just handed the talents over and skedaddled out of town. “Here you go boys, a literal ton of money. Gotta catch a train.” *Wait. What?*

Well, we good, industrious sorts look at what happened, and we look at the reactions of the man when he returned, and we say, “Well this is about working hard. This is about using what you’ve got. Don’t sit there like a lump. Get off your keister and produce. The blessed ones are the ones who make more. Those who get more. Those who have more.” But it’s OK, because, *wink wink*, it’s not really about money. It’s about the abilities God has given us. And Paul comes along later and tells us that we are given gifts to be used, not to make us better, but to build up the body of Christ. So, when we work hard, we honor Christ. So, get out there and use those gifts.

And you know what? That works! It’s a great story about laboring in the fields of the Lord, a story against the sin of sloth, or the selfishness of the one-talent slave who was worried only about his own skin, about the concept of stewardship and taking responsibility and being accountable, and ultimately about the need to prepare our souls for entry into the kingdom of God. That’s what this is all about,

after all. It works. And that's what 99.9 percent of the commentaries say this story is about.

And yet. Aren't you even a little uneasy about the portrayal of God, or Jesus, in this story? The master, the man going on a journey, is depicted as a hard man, reaping where he does not sow, gathering where he does not scatter seed. This sounds like a predatory businessperson who skirts the edge of ethical business practice to amass this incredible amount of wealth. And then he hands it over, with no instruction, as a test of those he owns. He gave it to them, in our translation, according to their ability. But in the Greek, it reads that he gave it to them "according to their power" (*dynamis*) —to the power they could wield in the mercenary world via the connections they have and the palms they can grease. How in the world could they double that enormous amount of money without succumbing to shady business dealings? Even the instructions to the one-talent slave were, "You should have put it in the bank." But to a first-century Jew, collecting interest was illegal; it was the sin of usury.

What if, instead of the usual interpretation, Jesus wanted us to identify with the one-talent man? What if Jesus was saying that Jesus was the one-talent slave? Weeping and gnashing of teeth was sometimes used to describe the effect of torture and execution. What if the blessing of the others was the blessing of a world that values wealth, and the joy of the master for them was to celebrate the spoils of getting one over on the poor who don't know any better and are just fodder for usurious financial practices? What if one opened a payday loan business and made the poor poorer by charging incomprehensible interest? What if one foreclosed on mortgages that were out of the reach of most workers no matter how they tried, thus keeping both property and whatever money had been paid? What if the honorable route was to choose not to play that game, not to take advantage of your neighbor, to bury the possibilities of becoming rich so as not to hurt anyone, and having to pay the price for your choices?

Remember, this story doesn't begin with "the kingdom of heaven is like." It begins with "it was as if." What if this story is not about the kingdom we long for, but the kingdom we've created, like a Frankenstein's monster, and now it is shaping our dreams and running our lives? Maybe I'm wrong here, and I'm not the first to see it this way, let me hasten to point out. I didn't come up with this interpretation.

But it has been troubling me. So, I thought I'd trouble you too. And maybe we can go back to our old interpretation and just keep working hard for the kingdom. That would be easier. That would be simpler. That would help us fit into the world we know. Isn't that better? *As if.*

So, what does it mean to enter into the joy? Or rather why does Jesus put that in the mouth of the master – if the master doesn't represent him or God? Because there is joy, and there is joy. We might as well admit it. Trying to proclaim that the only ones who know anything about joy are those who follow Christ isn't playing well in the world these days. On the one hand, those without Christ seem to be enjoying themselves quite well. On the other, Christians often come across as joyless people or are even considered “killjoys” by those who think we just want them to stop having fun. Yes, we can parse the word and talk about the difference between happiness and joy; we can talk about true joy that comes only from a relationship with God, but it isn't believable until we begin to live it. If there is no evidence that the joy we want to talk about permeates our lives, leaks out of us, drives how we interact with the world on a regular basis, then our words won't mean much to those outside, and our invitation won't be attractive to anyone.

So, entering into the joy of the one we follow is different from the joy that surrounds us. That is the joy in amassing stuff, the joy of getting ahead, the joy of being number one. Our joy is a joy of simplicity, of protection, even of the littlest ones, what seems the least valued.

November 22, 2020

Reign of Christ / Thanksgiving Sunday – In Christ's Glory

[Matthew 25:31-46](#)

INTRODUCTION

A full agenda this week. Attention to the upcoming Thanksgiving celebration need not overshadow the Reign of Christ Sunday. These are easily complementary. Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday is an opportunity to be reminded who is the one we have chosen to follow. It is an opportunity to give thanks for the author of salvation and the one who has given us the gift of the church, the fellowship of the body that we celebrate each time we gather in person or online.

Thanksgiving is a time to celebrate the abundance of God. We are overwhelmed with gratitude for all that God provides. There are clearly enough resources for everyone in the world to live fully. The problem we face is one of distribution, of sharing. So, how do we give thanks when there are many, maybe even some in the congregation, who don't have enough? How do we celebrate the abundance of God while acknowledging the selfishness or inequality of the human community?

Our text for this week invites us to see Christ, the Christ of glory and the Lord of us all, in the faces of the "least of these." Is this a time to celebrate the ministries of the church that give hands-on help to those in dire need? Are there those in prison ministries who can be thanked for their witness and service? Are there those who work in the medical profession, particularly the ER doctors and nurses who work on everyone, even those without means? Can you celebrate food bank workers or resale shop volunteers? Or is it time to challenge the congregation to find ways to live out their gratitude by serving others?

Remember when issuing the invitation, it is not about duty or about our "ought to." The invitation is about finding new ways to be thankful. We express our gratitude by giving, by serving, by loving. Maybe worship could include ways to sign up for service. It could be done via text or email, if you are not meeting in person. Or even if you are and don't want to run the risk of bringing people so close together to sign forms, a text or online sign up is ideal. The value of a text is that it can be done right then, rather than going home to think about it or forgetting to do it later.

As you can see in the liturgical resources, we switch from the green of Ordinary Time to the white of Reign of Christ Sunday. It is also the last Sunday of the Christian year. So, this is a culmination of all that has gone before us, a reminder of the Christ we follow and our gratitude for all that we have done together, even during a difficult year. Let there be a party atmosphere as we give thanks for God's goodness and for our place in the body of Christ. This is Christ in his glory.

PREACHING NOTES

The blessing here is the question that is asked of the Lord in glory. Did you notice the question? You probably noticed it from the goats. We'd expect goats to ask such a question. They are goats, after all. Jesus tells them what they didn't do, how they neglected him in his time of great need—when he was hungry, when he was thirsty. They didn't help; they didn't offer; they didn't pitch in or show up. But they ask, "When was it that we saw you and didn't help?" The implication being that had they known it was going to be on the test, they would have studied. Had they known those needy ones were important, they would have jumped up to help out.

Of course, we expect such goat-ish behavior from the goats. But then, hang on a minute. Didn't their question sound familiar by the time we got to it? Hadn't it been asked before? It was baa baa-ed by the sheep, even before the goats were confronted. Really? The sheep didn't know either? "When was it that we saw you . . . ?" What was it? Tell us. We must have missed it; we must have missed it in our busyness to help. In our attention to the job at hand, we didn't realize the gravity of the moment. We thought we were just helping. We thought we were just serving. We didn't realize that we were worshiping too.

There are those who don't like this story. They are afraid that it might lead to works righteousness, which means it might give us the idea that we can earn our place in the kingdom we long for. If we do good works, if we labor long and hard, then God will reward us and give us entry into the gates of heaven. And you have to agree, it does sound like that.

There are those who go to great lengths to tell us that we can't earn our salvation; that it comes as a gift from God, by grace through faith. And that any sense that we can pile up enough good works to earn it is not just misguided, it is dangerous; it is heresy. It is a dangerous mode of thinking that says my fate is in my hands; when in fact, it is always in God's hands. And God's hands are big enough to, well, "He's got the whole world in those hands." Remember? And we can trust in that.

So, do we nod and wink at Matthew's story as misguided somehow? Or a mystery beyond our understanding? Because it sounds like works righteousness. Well, it would sound like that, if it weren't for the questions. "When was it that we saw you? When was it that we were helping you? When was it that you were present

in a difficult moment of caring or a joyous moment of thanksgiving? When was it?" Those questions are what keeps this story from being about earning our way into God's kingdom. Because evidently the sheep weren't doing what they were doing in order to get into heaven. They were doing it because they learned to love somewhere. They learned to care somewhere. They learned to give and love and serve somewhere. They were doing it, in other words, because they were already a part of the kingdom. They were doing it as a response to salvation, not a means to earn it or be worthy of it.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was, he gave two. Love God and love neighbor. You can't, Jesus says, separate them. You can't love God and not love neighbor; it just doesn't work that way. Grace received has to be grace shared; that's what makes it grace. Jesus was saying to the sheep, "You have shown that you received grace because you lived it out in your everyday life." So, welcome home. Welcome to the glory.

When was it? And his answer was "whenever." Whenever you did it to them, you did it to me. Whenever you loved, you loved me. Whenever you cared, you cared for me. When it was easy and good, it was easy and good with me. When it was hard and painful, it was hard and painful with me. When was it? Whenever. He is there. His glory is there.