Sermon series: 364 Days of Thanksgiving – January 21, 2017 – Mighty Fortress Lutheran, Hiram, GA

Based on Matthew 25:14-30 – written by Pastor Paul Horn

Thankfulness Leads to Faithfulness

Two weeks ago, we saw Jesus heal ten lepers as he began his last, long journey to Jerusalem. We saw Jesus’ uncommon mercy, which led to uncommon gratitude from one of the lepers. Last week, we followed Jesus into Jericho, his last stop before Jerusalem. In Jericho, Jesus stayed with vertically challenged Zacchaeus, who showed us that overwhelming gratitude leads to overwhelming generosity.

Now, just a few days later, we find Jesus in Jerusalem, three days before his death on the cross. He is in the temple teaching the people for the last time. As usual, Jesus uses parables—earthly stories with a spiritual meaning. Today, as we conclude our sermon series on gratitude, we will look more closely at one of those parables. And as we do, we will see how **thankfulness shows itself in faithfulness**.

In our Gospel reading for today, Jesus told us that the kingdom of heaven is like **“a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them”** (Matthew 25:14). From the amount of money he gave his servants, it appears this was an exceptionally wealthy man. Matthew tells us that he gave “five talents of money” to the first servant.

It is thought that a talent was about 75 pounds of silver. Experts today aren’t sure exactly how much five talents of silver would be worth today, but it would be a lot. One scholar estimates that today it would be worth about $300,000. If that is true the rich man gave to his first servant roughly $1.5 million to manage for him. To the next, he gave about $600,000. And finally to the third, he gave $300,000. Then he went away on his journey.

Immediately the servant who received $1.5 million put it to work. He invested it. He worked hard with it and doubled it to $3 million. The second servant took his $600,000 and also put it to work, doubling it to $1.2 million. The third, however, took his 75 pounds of silver, his $300,000; put it in a box; and buried it in the ground to keep it safe.

A long time passes before the master returns from his long journey and decided to settle accounts with his servants. The first servant came forward. He gave his master the $3 million and explained how he had worked hard to double his master’s money. **“His master replied,** **‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’”** (Matthew 25:21).

The second servant came forward. He showed his master the $600,000 he had earned for him. The master responded in exactly the same way. **“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”** (Matthew 25:23).

But then the third servant came forward. He dug up his $300,000 and gave it to his master. He then proceeded to make excuses for not having earned anything more. He even blamed the master. He said that he was worried that the master would get mad if he invested it and somehow lost it. “You wicked, lazy servant!” the master replied. “You could have at least put the money in the bank and earned some interest for me!” With that the master gave his $300,000 to the first servant and threw the lazy servant out into the street.

So what’s the point of this parable? Jesus always had one main point in his parables. Jesus gives us talents, that is, skills and abilities and time, and he wants us to manage them faithfully. Another truth we learn is that God doesn’t give everyone the same gifts. To one servant the master gave five talents; to another, two talents; and to another, one talent. He gives each one of you exactly what you need. Now, sometimes we don’t think that we have any gifts to use or that our gifts don’t matter when it comes to serving God in our church, in our homes, or in our community, or we think it’s unfair that others have gifts we don’t have.

When I was in high school, I wanted so desperately to have my name on the basketball team roster. I practiced for hours every day in my driveway. I attended every open gym I could. But there were always other players who could handle the ball better than me, who knew the game better than I did, who were quicker than I was. They were more naturally gifted than me. No matter how hard I worked, I could never be as good as them. Every year I tried out for the team, I was cut.

There are people out there who seem to have everything handed to them. There are people out there who are more naturally gifted than you or me. There are people out there who don’t work as hard as we do and yet have better jobs, bigger homes, more money.

But before we whine and complain about how unfair we think that is, remember that even though God gives different gifts to different people, he blesses all of us with more than we deserve. Even the servant who only got one talent still received a lot—$300,000 is A LOT of money. Instead of comparing ourselves with those who have more than we do—instead of focusing on what we don’t have—let’s remember what we do have.

Look at the spiritual blessings: through his Word or through baptism, God called you to be his child. He brought you out of the family of the devil and brought you into his family. He forgives your sins. He comforts you. He gives you pastors and teachers to remind you and reassure of how generous God is to you through his Son Jesus. He gives the resurrection from the dead and life eternal in heaven.

Your Master also generously gives material blessings. As I said last week, when you go home today, before the football game, walk through your home. Open all of your closets, the pantry doors, the refrigerators, freezers, your attic, your shed and garage. Look at the number of contacts in your cell phone, all of your family, friends. Look around this room for a minute and look at all of your brothers and sisters who are happy to listen to you, to cry with you, to pray for you and encourage you. You are rich!

God is generous with the abilities and talents he gives you. Each one of you has gifts and abilities. Some of you are skilled in working with your hands, others have athletic ability, and others abilities in math or science or language or business, skill in music or drawing or design. Some of you are hard workers, caring encouragers, compassionate people, good friends, gifted leaders, prayer warriors, willing volunteers.

And all of these gifts, they all belong to God, and yet he has entrusted those amazing treasures to you and to me. He asks us to take care of them, and the only thing he expects from us is faithfulness. Go back to the first servant who earned five talents. The second earned only two. Yet God didn’t say to the second guy, “Why didn’t you earn as much as that first guy?” No, he told him, **“Well done, good and faithful servant!”** Even though he didn’t earn as much as the first servant, he did his best with what God had given him. That’s what God wants from you and me—that we recognize what he has entrusted to us and that we use those gifts to the best of our ability. But we don’t always do that so well, do we? Like the third servant, we are often lazy. We like to make excuses.

Think about in our lives how often we don’t do our best. Parents, how many times have we rushed our children off to bed so we could plop down in front of the TV, rather than to listen to their concerns, to share a comforting Word of God with them, and to pray with them? Think about all the time we waste at our jobs, standing around talking, checking Facebook, working at only half speed. Think about school. How often do you actually study as hard as you can? How much do you really pay attention in class? Or think about our church. How often don’t we stay in bed on Sunday morning and worship at “St. Pillow,” rather than come to church? How often do we see an opportunity to use our talents, skills and time and say, “No, someone on that committee offended me in the past. I don’t want to work with them. I just don’t have the time.” Do we usually give God our best or our leftovers? Do we tend to make excuses like the third servant?

In spite of that, our God gave his best for us. Even when you are not faithful, God is faithful and gave his best. He gave his own Son. His Son gave his best for you. He was faithful in everything he did, faithful with all his gifts and abilities, faithful with all of his material possessions, faithful with his time, faithful with the people God gave him in his life. Faithful all the way to cross, to suffer hell for our unfaithfulness, to suffer God’s wrath for our excuses, to suffer death for our complaining and comparing of gifts.

God is faithful. He forgives you. God forgives your wastefulness. God forgives your pride. God forgives your laziness and excuses. It’s all been washed away forever through Jesus. God is not going to punish you. He is not going to throw you out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. When your time comes, your Savior-God is going to throw open the gates to heaven and say, **“Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master’s happiness!”**

Isn’t that amazing? Even though you are unfaithful in so many ways, God is still going to say to you, **“Well done, good and faithful servant!”** He is going to say that because, when he looks at you, he doesn’t see your failings and faithlessness — he only sees how Jesus faithfully served, how Jesus faithfully lived, how Jesus faithfully died in your place.

You see how faithful Jesus has been to you. How will you respond? You will respond by thankfully and faithfully serving him. You will do your best in school. God doesn’t expect you to be the best in your class. He expects you to do your best. He wants you to study hard. Use the brain God has given you.

You will do your best at your job. Whether you are the supervisor or entry level, whether you are managing a corporation or managing activities at your home, whether you care for newborn infants as a nurse or babysit a three-year-old to earn a little money, you will faithfully give God your best. If your job is cleaning grills at McDonald’s, show God how much you love him by making them the cleanest grills around. You will be the best mother and wife you can be. You will be the best husband and father you can be. You will be the best friend you can be. God doesn’t expect you to be *the* best at anything. All he wants is for you to faithfully do *your* best with what he has so generously given to you.

For the last three weeks, we have talked about what it means to be thankful. We have seen uncommon mercy lead to uncommon gratitude. We have seen overwhelming gratitude lead to overwhelming generosity. And today, we have seen how thankfulness leads to faithfulness. This year, the next 364 days, I pray that you are faithful as you journal every single day the things that you are truly thankful for, the things God has blessed you with, so that these next 364 days we live lives of thanksgiving. God grant it to us for Jesus’ sake. Amen.