



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 28A, NOVEMBER 15, 2020  
JUDGES 4:1-7; PSALM 123; MATTHEW 25:14-30



## FOLLOW THE GOOD ROAD

“Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you are welcome here” For years, those words have defined this Cathedral community. They are on the home page of the Cathedral’s website. The priests offer them as a preface to the Eucharist. Newcomers ask about them. Newcomers and old timers alike find inspiration in them.

Those words are more than a catch-phrase though. This idea of unconditional belonging lay claim to great theological truth about Christian community and God. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We worship a God who is gracious. That God continually extends an invitation for you and me to gather around the every table God sets for us.

That may be, but what about this morning's Gospel? How does the Cathedral's idea of belonging square up what we just heard?

The parable of the talents is one of those hard lessons in scripture. It is tempting to preach on something, anything, other than this gospel, especially today. But you know what? Scripture finds us for a reason. Jesus expects us to wrestle with the hard stuff, because that's how new insights are discovered.

The parable of talents is provocative. Three characters receive an unexpected windfall. Cool! Two of the characters double their shares. Good for them, assuming they earned those gains in a fair way. Then there is this third person. She guards her treasure like it is the most precious thing in the world. She plants it in the ground to keep it safe, and then she waits.

That's where this story takes a troubling turn. Playing it safe isn't so safe after all. Apparently, results matter. When she fails to generate something more, there are consequences. In the world of the parable, it turns out that not everyone is welcome after all.

Jesus, what's going on?

One thing is clear: what you and I do with our lives matters. God cares deeply for you and me and longs for us to respond with that

same attentiveness. Almost every sermon includes some version of that message. That is good news. But parables always have more than one point. What's clear at first is only one of many possibilities. Today's parable hinges on another question: where is God in the story?

It's not uncommon to associate God with the master of a story. In this parable, the underlying Greek text is ambiguous. The same word could translate as a common master, or it could refer to the title bestowed on Jesus as Lord. So, God could be the master. But if that's the case, I take issue with some of God's behavior. God doesn't take away from the poor to give to the rich. Nor does God determine worthiness based on output. I'm tired of following that god.

Jesus challenges us to imagine another possibility.

The first two characters are rewarded for turning a profit. The third one refuses to participate at all. She says no to a system founded on the principle of extraction rather than generosity. She rejects fear in favor of love. She knows that while God's way can be demanding, God is never harsh. Rather than earning a profit, this third character *becomes* the prophet. Like Jesus, she speaks truth to power. Like Jesus, the system rejects her for

the choice. Her rejection becomes her baptism.

This is a story about finding another way, one that centers on God's hope for the world rather than our fears of it. What appears to be a harsh message at first turns out to be a pretty good lesson for baptism.

Baptism affirms an inward reality: no matter who you are, you are beloved by God. No matter where you are in your spiritual journey, you are welcomed by God with great delight. What happens in baptism can never be undone, not by you or me and certainly not by God. God's hope always rests in you.

Baptism also reveals an outward reality. God sees differently than we do. Through the waters of baptism, we get a glimpse of God's dream for the world. Our own illusions come into focus, too. We begin to understand the chaos in and around us. We see how that chaos prevents God's way from becoming a reality.

Baptism is one way we say yes to God. It is our affirmation of God's dream. It starts to re-order our chaos.

We say yes because God speaks through us, not at us. We strive for God because God wants us to, not because we have to. It will take the rest of our lives to make that dream a reality, and God is okay with that, too.

St. Clare of Assisi bears some resemblance to the prophet in the parable. Clare was raised in a wealthy Italian family during the 13th century. If she had wanted to, she could have inherited enough to guarantee a comfortable existence for the rest of her life. Instead, Clare chose another path. After she heard one sermon by St. Francis, she walked away from her family treasure. Some might say she buried her talent.

But you know what? By rejecting one path, Clare uncovered another one. What she discovered was her life. She went on to live the life God dreamed for her. In 1512, Clare founded the first all-female Franciscan community. Today, over 20,000 people participate in the Order of Clare. That makes Clare's order almost as large as the Diocese of Olympia and much older!

Clare trusted in God's promise of unconditional welcome and generous love. She chose to follow that good road. Jesus made that same choice. He urges us to make the same choice, too.

Today, Lydia McNary Crosbie, begins her journey on that path. Lydia, your parents and sponsors will guide you on the way. A wise elder from the Tuesday Bible Study put it this way. Rachel, Russ, Mary, and Sandra, today you promise Lydia that you will show up as a loving presence in Lydia's life. You are her

spiritual giants. But you are not the only ones who make that promise, and you don't do this alone. All of you who witness this baptism promise to offer counsel, celebration, and comfort along the way.

Today, Lydia, her parents, and sponsors say yes. But they are not the only ones who commit to following the good road. All of us are called to participate in God's dream. That dream becomes reality when gifts are given away abundantly and unconditionally with love. That dream happens when gifts are received with wonder and offered back with joy. God's dream becomes real when everyone is welcomed, no matter what.

Jesus asks us to join him making God's dream visible. It will take everything you and I have. While it is demanding, what Jesus asks is never harsh. When you need a little encouragement, take comfort in the blessing that bears St. Clare's name:

Live without fear. Your Creator has made you holy, has always protected you and loves you as a mother. Go in peace to follow the good road. May God bless you in this work now and always.

Amen.

**Matthew 25:14-30:** *[Jesus said, "It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"]*