

**“Faithful Response”**

*And he said to him, “Well done, good servant!” (Luke 19:17).*

I once saw a bumper sticker that read, “Jesus is coming back. Look busy.” As misguided as this statement is, a cursory reading of today’s Scripture lessons could definitely lead you to a place of fear. You see, both of these readings deal with the return of Jesus on the Last Day and both of these readings carry hard and frightening words of judgment. In the Old Testament lesson, Malachi warns that, “the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be like stubble” (Malachi 4:1). And the Gospel reading from Luke carries a similar sense of judgment as Jesus tells the story of a servant who is judged severely for his faithless stewardship.

With words and images like these it’s easy to understand how our bumper sticker theologian might’ve come to such an anxious conclusion about the return of Christ on Judgment Day...but the truth that underlies both of these readings is actually incredibly Good News! And today, as we turn our attention to the topic of stewardship, the message through which the Holy Spirit is speaking to us is one of faith-filled and joyful response to our God who has done everything for us and has given us a role to play in the work of His Kingdom.

Our reading from Luke begins with the words, “As they heard these things...” From this introduction, it’s clear that we are hearing a story that is already in progress and to properly understand the parable that follows, we need to be aware of the “things” to which Luke was referring in verse 11 and this takes us right back to the story of Zacchaeus from last week’s Gospel reading. Now, without rehashing everything from last week’s sermon, the story of Zacchaeus shows us the shocking extent of God’s grace as Jesus speaks words of acceptance and salvation to an “unforgivable” outcast and then tells the indignant crowd that this kind of undeserved mercy is exactly why He came. Then, as today’s reading begins, we are reminded that Jesus is just a few miles outside of Jerusalem and just a few days away from the cross *and* that these people are totally misguided in their understanding of the Kingdom of God. It’s in this mix of misconception and misunderstanding about the Messiah that Jesus tells them a story of a nobleman who, “went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return” (Luke 19:12).

The way we view the identity of the nobleman is crucial for our understanding of the parable and about this character there is almost universal agreement among Biblical scholars: The nobleman in this parable is Christ! The Nobleman was the One from God who was speaking to them now; it was Jesus Himself who would be hated by His own people and spoken against by those who rejected Him as their King. The Nobleman was Jesus Himself...the Messiah...the Anointed Son of God...the Savior of the world who was now nearing Jerusalem where He would establish His kingdom through His own death on the cross and where He would rise from the grave as the King of kings! In a few veiled sentences, Jesus had just outlined God’s plan for redemption and it’s here, that the parable now turns to the role of the servants in the work of God’s Kingdom.

At this point, it’s very important to see and understand the meaning of the “mina” in this story. In Jesus’ day, a mina was an amount of money that was equal to about three months of wages. It was a tremendous treasure and, as each one of the ten servants received their mina from the Master, His instructions were very clear: “Engage in business until I come.” Or, in other words: “Put these gifts to work while I am gone.” Scholars have differing ideas about the elements of this parable, but one thing is clear: The Nobleman has given great gifts to His servants and *these gifts are to be used*. What I want you to understand today is that the mina in this parable – or the gift of the King to be used for the work of the Kingdom – is nothing less than the Word of God! In fact, it’s the very same extravagant, gracious, life-saving message of forgiveness that Christ had announced to Zacchaeus in the verses just before this parable! And it is the very same extravagant, gracious, life-saving message about the Kingdom of God that had accompanied the 72 disciples Jesus had sent out back in chapter ten! And it’s the same extravagant, gracious, life-saving message of discipleship that Jesus would give to the Apostles in the Great Commission just before ascending into the “far country” of heaven. *And, my friends, it is the very same extravagant, gracious, life-saving message that God has given to us today!*

God has given us the treasure of the Gospel and He has commissioned us to share this gift as we await His return. And from this extravagant, gracious, life-saving gift He will accomplish the work of His Kingdom! That is the Good News of this parable! That is the promise of our God and in the parable the results of this promise are revealed when the first two servants come before the Master and report astonishing results. The first servant said, "Lord, your mina has made ten minas more" And the second servant came and said, "Lord, your mina has made five minas." The yield of the gift is beyond belief! In fact, it has increased five and ten times the amount of the original gift...and this is the way the Kingdom of God works! In Isaiah 55:11 God tells us, "my word...will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." And we can trust this promise of God knowing that through the extravagant, gracious, life-saving gift of His Word, He will always work and the results of His work will be amazing!!!

There's no question that the power of this promise is encouraging...but what about the third servant in today's parable? If God's gift is so extravagant, gracious and life-saving, then why is this servant met with such harsh judgment? First, we need to recognize that the gift to each servant was the same. There was no distinction! None of them deserved the gift and yet each servant was given a mina and each servant was instructed to put it to use. And before we question the rebuke and judgment of the Master, we need to understand the blatant disobedience of the servant. You see, the third servant rejected the Word of the Master. He didn't receive the gift for what it was and instead of putting it to work as the Master instructed, he hid it. This servant goes to great lengths to conceal the gift and then, in his attempt to justify his disobedience, the wicked servant actually impugns the Master saying, "you are a severe man. You take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow" (Luke 19:20-21).

Ignoring the generosity of the Master and acting on his own flawed assumptions, this servant actively, deliberately and knowingly covered up and hid the mina he had been given. The servant disregarded the gift and despised the call of the Master and then defended himself by actually calling the Master's character into question. *What happens next?* He is stripped of the one gift he had been given and in the verse following today's text he is associated with the enemies of Master who will be slaughtered before Him (Luke 19:27).

The plight of this servant should get our attention and it should shake us up because if we're honest, we have also despised God's gifts. We have defined God by our own standards, we have taken His extravagant, gracious and life-saving Word for granted and all of us have at times covered up the Good News that we have been called to proclaim. One of the greatest temptations we face is to minimize the message of Christ and to doubt the power and promise of God that His Word will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it. The first two servants seemed to understand clearly that the abundant return on their investment had nothing to do with them. Either one of those servants could've said, "I made good business decisions" or "I worked overtime" or "I hired the right staff" or "I had a good marketing plan" but the pronoun "I" never shows up in their report. Instead, they rightly say: "Lord, your mina has made ten minas more" and "Lord, your mina has made five minas." These are the words of faithful stewards! These are the words of servants who receive the gift of the master and respond in joy and amazement at all the Master is able to accomplish trusting that success is completely and totally in His hands.

After years of working with the poorest of the poor in India, a reporter once asked Mother Teresa how she kept going, knowing that she could never meet the needs of all the people dying in the streets of Calcutta. She replied, "I am not called to be successful. I'm called to be faithful." And that is the call that we have also received. Our bumper sticker theologian was half-right...Jesus *is* coming back! And no matter what our vocation may be, we can be busy because He has done everything for us! His gift to us is the promise that we have been accepted by God! That we have been forgiven! That we, who have nothing to offer the King of kings, have been chosen by God for eternal life! The extravagant, gracious and life-saving gift of Jesus Christ has been given to us and no matter how often we have buried this gift and no matter how blatantly we have disobeyed the voice of the Master, in Christ we have been forgiven and, amazingly, He will use people like us to accomplish His Kingdom work.

My brothers and sisters, Jesus is coming back and we can leap "like calves from the stall" and we can risk His gifts and be bold for the sake of the Kingdom, because its success depends solely on the power of God to do what He has promised! The gift is yours to "engage in business" until that day when He comes back to say, "Well done good and faithful servant." Go and serve in the peace of this promise!

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