

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, November 15, 2020, Year A

**St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas GA**

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

***“Caring for the Faith”***

We often think of our lives as a test – and we are confronted with examinations – large and small – each and every day. How many times have you heard the question – “what’s in your wallet?” This could easily become a sermon on “time, treasure and talent’ – but that is not my intention – making it all about money and tithing – relax, that is not this sermon.

I want to share with you a story about a man named Wilson A. Bentley – who became known as “Snowflake Bentley” from Jericho, Vermont. As a child he was fascinated by snow. When he was 17 his parents spent their life savings for him to buy a special camera – that would work with his microscope – so he could take pictures of the snowflakes. He developed a technique of microphotography to reveal to the world the grandeur and mystery of one of God’s gifts to humanity – the snowflake. He learned that each snowflake begins as a speck – too small to be seen – and as the crystal grows, the branches come together to form the snowflake. He said that in all of his pictures, he never found two snowflakes alike. He learned that most crystals had six branches and that each was a masterpiece in design. Without his passion – the world would not have seen the majesty of snowflakes – and one man’s desire to let the world see them in his book ‘Snow Crystals.’ The world has been blessed because Wilson Bentley wanted to uncover and preserve the work of the creator – as a good steward.

When it comes down to tests, the truth is - one day Jesus will come back again and then comes the final exam, and He will see who passes and who fails. We can only hope that there will be good things in store for people who get good marks, and bad things for people with bad marks. But we do need to remember that Jesus declared that He had come to call, not the righteous, but sinners. He had come, He said, to seek and to save the lost. Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees that the tax-collectors and prostitutes – who would have failed any examination that the Temple leadership would have given them – would be going into the kingdom of heaven ahead of them. And we can read in an entire chapter in the Gospel of Matthew – chapter 23, of Jesus telling the self-appointed leaders of the Jewish people how dangerous it was simply to think of things in terms of all the rules they had to try to keep. If you think about the prostitutes and tax collectors – why would they get in first? Because their lives changed – they heard the Word of God and they were transformed because of it.

So what is today’s parable about in Matthew 25? The normal way of thinking would suggest that Jesus is preparing the disciples for quite a long period during which He will not be there with them, and will have especially important things to do. On His return they would be judged according to how they have performed. That looks like it is all about the works you do. I want to suggest to you that it is not what you do – but in what and whom you believe. I think that at the root of this parable is how we care for the many blessings that God has bestowed upon us, always remembering that they belong to Him. Of course, remember that God put humanity in charge of ruling over all living beings on the earth (remember back in Genesis) – and so comes into play of being good stewards for Him, in whom we believe.

What has become somewhat confusing for people in understanding this parable of the talents – is the word ‘talent’ itself. A ‘talent’ was a unit of money, roughly worth what a worker could earn in 15 years. Of course we look at the word ‘talent’, in the sense of the gifts or skills that a person possesses. After all – “America’s Got Talent!” We think of it as they can sing, they can dance, they can tap dance! I can remember I did a special session at the women’s retreat up in Tonawanda, New York, about Spiritual Gifts. There was a bit of confusion. This very talented lady sang in the choir and she said that her spiritual gift was singing. I corrected her and said that her spiritual gift was ‘leading worship.’ Singing is a talent, and she became upset. I spoke to her later, telling her that we use our talents to honor God, and in doing so we lead worship. After that she felt great. That is where the confusion comes in.

So many people have been called to care for parts of God’s Kingdom. The scribes and Pharisees had been given the law of Moses. They had been given the Temple, the sign of God’s presence among them. They had been given wonderful promises about how God would bless not only Israel but, through Israel, the whole world. Looking at that leadership and the promises of God – in effect, they had buried them in the ground. They had turned God’s command in Isaiah 49:6 “*I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth*” as an excuse to keep the light for themselves. They could be called ‘*worthless servants*.’ And now, when their master was at last coming back, He was going to call them to account. The threatened destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was to be seen as the master’s punishment on the servant who had not done God’s will. The emphasis of this parable falls, again and again, on this third servant, the one whose foolishness fails to respond to the master’s generosity – and goes and buries the talents.

Who then are the other two, the ones who respond appropriately to the master’s trust? They are, it seems, those who hear the call of Jesus and, on that basis, develop what Israel has already been given so that it now grows and becomes something new. We call that something new – ‘*ekklesia*’ – the church. They are like the mustard seed which starts small and then grows large. They are the signs that God’s kingdom is starting to bud and blossom. And now, when Jesus has come to Jerusalem to force the final confrontation between God’s kingdom and the system that had resisted and opposed it – then those who are loyal to Him will be like those who have made wise use of the talents – of the money that had been entrusted to them. This setting means that any sense of a ‘final examination’ is placed within a larger context, in which the grace and love of God are overflowing at every point. God does long for people to use the gifts that they have been given - wisely. God did indeed come, in the person of Jesus, the Messiah, to find out who within His chosen people had used profitably the many blessings that He had showered upon them.

We as Christians have been given great riches to care for, in the Word of God, and the faith that has been handed down from the Apostles. Do we share it – or do we keep it buried deep inside – keeping it to ourselves?

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This parable and others like it do not give a complete picture of character of the Creator God, the Maker and Lover of the world, the God who sent His only Son, Jesus, as the personal expression of His love. Remember when this parable occurs. It comes towards the end of a Life which is about to reach its great climax; and that climax comes when Jesus, the Son of Man *“gives His life as a ransom for many”* (Matthew 20:28). When Jesus speaks of someone being *“outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (Matthew 25:30) we must never forget that He was Himself on the way into the darkness, where even He would sense Himself abandoned by God. (Matthew 27:45–46) *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?”* He died for all future believers. How have you cared for the faith that has been handed down to you? I am reminded of an important question that I once heard: “if you were arrested and charged for being a Christian – would there be enough evidence for you to be convicted?” Think about that!

I want to thank this parish for itself being a faithful steward, and what we have done in this Sanctuary, how it has been transformed. Just look at the pictures when this was empty at the very beginning of Saint Andrew’s Anglican Church, and all there was – were some pews, some swirls in some horrible looking plywood and wood and a red runner, and a barren Sanctuary. How God has transformed this place. Take a look at the old pictures of the roof of this church and how that has been transformed because of the love, and the grateful obedience of the people of God – of Saint Andrew’s. We are so very, very blessed.

And so I have to ask you one last question – and it is not “what’s in your wallet?” but it is “are you ready for the final exam?”