

The Twenty-Seventh Sunday after Pentecost • November 16, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 25:14-30

"Faithfully Managing God's Gifts"

Have you ever been in a bank vault? I remember running errands with my parents in years past when we'd need to stop by the bank. We'd go down into the basement of the building, down to the vault room, where we'd wait for assistance from the bank clerk who'd take Mom or Dad in to retrieve our family's safe deposit box. As I waited, my eyes would always be drawn to the massive, metal door that stood there, swung open to the side. Looking at those doors, you'd think that the engineers that design them must have degrees in marketing, too: everything about a vault door, from its glass-encased dials and gears on its interior to the front-side-spoked wheel that extends the outsized steel rods that seal the vault shut, silently assures bank customers that their valuables would be secure behind its nightly watch. If for some reason you've never seen a vault in person, you've probably seen what one looks like on television. On the game show *The Price Is Right*, for instance, they make use of an impressive mock-up of a vault door for the long-running "Safe Crackers" pricing game. High-security vaults have also been featured in movies and books: in the *Harry Potter* series, if you could look into the most closely-guarded vaults at the most celebrated bank in the magical world, you might find a dragon protecting the treasure inside! People use vaults to keep that which they value, because the vault keeps its contents safe.

What if your life was a series of back-and-forth trips to a vault? What do you value to the extent that you want to stash it away behind a colossal door? What aspects of life do you feel compelled to hold on to for yourself?

Given the stress that we're feeling in the economy these days, your finances might come quickly to mind. In light of uncertainty in the stock markets, you might start to think more and more that you need to keep what you've got, hiding your money away under the mattress to keep it safe. Expenses which once seemed inconsequential now have you considering their worth. You might begin wondering if that daily *grande double latte* really is that much better than a tumbler of coffee from home. How much do you need to save, how much can you afford to spend?

What else would you put in your vault to keep it safe, to guard it? Do you sometimes wish, like the Jim Croce song says, that you could save time in a bottle? If a corner of your vault had a dedicated section with bins for different kinds of time – "up time", "down time," "work time", "quality time," "away time," "family time," "me time" – which stores would be running low, which are getting dusty, and which others are filled to overflowing?

Indeed, if we can think of our whole life in this way, each of us could find that there are certain things – often intangible – that we jealousy guard behind the door of our own personal vault. Money and time are common struggles in our culture. Which other aspects of life might you have given to a dragon for protection? How important is your popularity among your peers or the prestige of your position and standing in society? To what degree does personal risk factor into the decisions you make in your relationships? Does your hobby take up so much of your energy that you feel too drained to do anything else? In these few things and so many more besides, each of us can be tempted to try so hard to keep hold of something that we never use it for its intended purpose. That which might once have been good and helpful becomes a dangerous risk. Fear and selfishness blind us to what we have and why we have it. No matter how impressive a vault might be, what good is it if nothing ever comes out of it?

In Jesus' parable, the master entrusted his servants with talents according to their ability. That was a big deal: one talent was not a coin, but an amount of money that probably equaled an entire lifetime's wages for a laborer! If someone gave you, say, \$10,000,000 to manage for a ten year period, what would you do with it? That's the question that faced the servants in Jesus' parable. Even the last servant knew that the talent was not his own and that his master would return and demand an accounting of the servants' management. Would you throw the money in the safe deposit box in a vault, where you could feel confident in its security? Or would you take the funds and – with a little creativity – put them to work?

As God's servant, how will you faithfully manage gifts that have been out into your care? What will you do with your intellect, your compassion, your hobby, your popularity, your athletic ability, your time, your money, and all the rest, knowing that these all come from God – and that we will give an accounting for our management? Hoarding such things for yourself or hiding them away where no one might find them are options, to be sure. Likewise, you could live life without ever going to your vault to make a deposit, wantonly and wastefully frittering away the gifts without managing them at all, without putting any thought into their best use. It's no surprise that none of these lifestyles could be called faithful management of God's gifts, but what does?

God has not *merely* given you things to manage in life, or even life itself. Like the servants in Jesus' parable, God has given you something of immense value, something which must never be taken lightly: He has given you *new* life. God forgives our faithless management for the sake of His Son's suffering and death on our behalf. And the Holy Spirit opens your eyes to see that Jesus, our master, has not left his servants alone, without direction or hope. Jesus sent the Spirit to give us his gifts, to deposit hope in us and to guide our lives. He comes to us and opens the heavy vault door that we have left shut. He unearths the treasure that we have buried in the ground. The Holy Spirit is at work, enabling us to faithfully manage God's gifts, neither hoarding them nor wasting them.

Beginning this weekend, our congregation will have the opportunity to live out Jesus' parable. We are participating in Mission India's "Multiplication Plan" project in order to help support the work of our brothers and sisters in Christ in India. Mission India has sent St. John's an amount of money, which will be distributed as \$10 to each household in our congregation. Over the next twelve weeks, each recipient will be challenged to prayerfully take that \$10 and multiply it for work among God's people in India. At the end of the Multiplication Plan project, we will gather the funds which have been raised and return them to Mission India for use by the Children's Bible Club program. The Children's Bible Clubs share the Gospel message with kids in India through songs, games, and Bible stories, bringing the good news of a loving Savior to children who might never have heard of Jesus.

As you face the decisions of what to guard and what to give away, take hope in the knowledge that Christ is coming again – not just to call for an accounting of your management, but to make all things new. "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6), that day on which Jesus returns and his victory over sin, death, and the devil is made full. As we come to the end of the Church year, the close of the season of Pentecost, the congregational response to each of our prayer petitions is "We pray in hope, make all things new." Lives lived in sanctified, Christian stewardship are lives lived in hope, because we look forward to the future. This life, regardless of how much or how little you store away in your vault, will end. However, when Christ returns, he will call his servants to enter into the joy of their master.

As those who would faithfully manage God's gifts, we live in the present but look to the future, because we remember the past – especially that day on which another heavy door was rolled away, to reveal an empty tomb. In Christ, our risen, reigning, and returning Lord,

Amen.