

“Safety First!”

Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 25:14-30

Vs. 18 “But he who had received the one talent went and dug into the ground and hid his master’s money”

“Safety first!” We have heard this saying before, haven’t we? Parents remind their children of the importance of safety with this phrase. Teachers use this saying often to create a safe environment for learning and a safe setting for recess. The government reminds us of the importance of “safety first” at our places of employment through the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The message of “safety first!” is even relayed to toddlers through the cartoon character, “Bob the Builder.” It seems like a pretty helpful approach to life. “Safety first!”

This “safety first!” philosophy was certainly the approach taken by one of the characters of Jesus’ parable of the talents that we heard this morning. The master in the parable entrusts his wealth to three servants and then he goes off on a journey. The amount that he entrusts to them is conveyed in terms of talents. At the time of Jesus a talent was a monetary unit worth about twenty years’ wages.

To one of the servants he entrusts five talents. This servant risks the talents in investments and doubles his investment, gaining five more talents. To another servant he entrusts two talents. This servant risks his talents in investments and, likewise, doubles his investment and gains two more talents. To a third servant he entrusts one talent. The response of this servant is given in vs. 18 of Jesus’ parable, “But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money.” This servant took the approach of “safety first!”

The third servant endeavored to be cautious. He did not want to risk losing his talent in the stock market. He decided not to risk investing in real estate at the chance that he might end up with an underwater mortgage. His approach was to keep it safe. So he buried the talent in the ground. It is safe there.

We read in the parable that the master returns from his journey and requires a recounting of his servants. The one with the ten talents is commended, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt 25:21). Likewise, the one with four talents comes before the master and is also commended, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Mt 25:23). Then Jesus recounts the story of the third servant in this way, “He also who had received the one talent came forward saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was *afraid*, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours’” (Mt 25:24-25, emphasis mine). “I

was afraid.” Here we see the motive of the third servant. His motive was fear and so he does the safe thing. “Safety first!”

Now we need to remember that Jesus is telling us a parable. So this is not to be taken literally in the sense that Jesus is giving us advice on financial investments, although that could be one point of application. So what is the meaning of the parable?

To understand the meaning of the parable in its original context it is important to remember that Jesus is speaking this parable first and foremost to his twelve disciples. It is a private conversation with them (Mt 24:3). These are the twelve disciples who are training with Jesus for three years to be the future leaders of the Church. These three years might be considered in some ways as the equivalent of their Seminary education. For, they will soon be sent out as the Twelve Apostles with these words of Jesus, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19-20). They will be pastors or missionaries of sorts throughout the ancient world. Jesus, their master, is entrusting his wealth to them. He is entrusting them with the mission of the Gospel, the mission to advance the Kingdom of God in the world. And so he tells them a parable that is meant to instruct them how they ought to serve.

Through the parable Jesus instructs his Twelve Disciples to serve in loving trust of their master who sent them forth to serve. Their trust in God is what should motivate their work as they spread the Gospel and advance the Kingdom of God in the world. Conversely, Jesus also speaks the parable to warn the disciples against acting out of fear. They should not be so afraid of the external circumstances that they act too cautiously, showing that fear, and not trust, is their primary motivation. When it comes to spreading the Gospel and advancing the Kingdom of God in the world the “safety first” philosophy doesn’t fly.

So in what ways has God entrusted the work of the Gospel and the mission of the Church to us? As the baptized, believing people of God and members of Atonement we are part of the work of the Gospel and the mission of the Church. We have reaped the benefits of the spreading of the Gospel when we believed and were baptized. We continue to reap the rewards of the mission of the Gospel when we continually receive of its fruits on Sunday morning through the hearing of the Word, receiving of the body and blood of Christ, and receive the sure and certain proclamation that our sins are forgiven.

At the same time God has called us to be a part of spreading the Gospel and advancing the Kingdom of God to others. To those in the community of Spring Valley. To those neighbors and coworkers with whom he has put us in relationship. We are a Christ centered congregation that seeks to care for the whole person, within the church and outside the church, with the good news of Jesus Christ. He has entrusted this mission to us as a congregation.

So in what ways are we operating with a “safety first” mindset of which we need to repent? In what ways as a congregation are we being too cautious with what the Lord has entrusted to us rather than

putting it to use in mission? In what ways are we giving the impression that we are motivated by crippling fear rather than a bold, freeing, trust in our master and Lord, Jesus Christ? Are there ways in which we, personally, might be thinking, “safety first” with the time, talents, and treasures that the Lord has entrusted to us? Are we thinking “safety first” and operating in fear with the gifts God has given to us in a way that is leading us to neglect supporting the work of the Church and tithing a portion of our gifts?

As we consider these questions I have a strong feeling that we will all feel a little convicted. We all will see ways in which, personally, and together as the Church, that we have acted with a “safety first” mindset that shows a motivation of fear rather than trust in God. Let us then bring these sins before our God and ask for his forgiveness and strength to do better. For he is the one who chose not to operate with a “safety first” mindset for you.

In Christ God sent for us one servant that did not play it safe. In order to advance the mission of God and spread the Kingdom of God in this world it meant a sacrifice. That is the shape that service took for our God—sacrificial service (Phil 2:5-11). He did it so that you could have safety and pardon. Now as you live in this world you are safe in this servant. Now you need not live in fear or tentatively but fully trusting him in all things. Trusting him to the point that you respond by giving a portion of all that the Lord has given to you in order to continually advance the work of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God in this world.

So “safety first?” In one sense, “yes.” You are safely in Christ. But in another sense, “no.” Because you are safely in Christ you have the freedom and privilege to live boldly trusting in Christ. We live in Christ not putting “safety first” but putting “Christ first” (Col 1:18). So help us, God. Amen.