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“Good and Faithful Servants Know Their Master”

Text: Matthew 25:14-30 (Zephaniah 1:7-16)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Delay] You don't like waiting, do you? Neither do I. Waiting in line, waiting for your web page to load, waiting in traffic, waiting for your meal to arrive at the restaurant, waiting for pastor to begin this sermon . . . So fast is big business in our world today. Fast food, fast HOT lanes on the highway, faster internet and cell service, fast church. Don't make me wait, make it short and sweet and to the point. Whether all that's good or bad I'll let you decide.

Last week the parable Jesus told talked about waiting - waiting for the end, waiting for that day when Jesus returns. We noted that while many fear that day - *judgment day!* - Jesus described it for us as a day of joy, the start of a wedding feast that has no end. So we can look forward to that day and wait for it not in fear, but with a joyful anticipation.

But here's the question: *what do we do until then?* How do we who do not like waiting, wait for that day? That's what Jesus' parable is about today. Because Christianity isn't just about “getting into heaven” - it's about life now, too.

Now, this is a really important parable to get right, because there are two equally dangerous errors people fall into about this. As many of you know, I often describe it as the two ditches along the sides of the road - we don't want to fall into either ditch, but stay on the road. The road of the right teaching and understanding of Scripture.

So the ditch on the one side of the road is the: *you have to do certain things, or enough certain things, in order to be saved* ditch. That your Christian life now is about earning your way into heaven - like maybe what those first two servants in the parable today *seemed* to do. This is what could be called the works righteous ditch, and this can get so bad that faith and Jesus and forgiveness do not enter the picture *at all*. All that matters, all the focus, is what you do, your goodness, your effort. Your good works, your church attendance, your serving. Doing enough to get in. We don't want to fall into that ditch. And we Lutherans are usually pretty good at avoiding that ditch . . . *most* of the time . . . except when we think we're a little higher on the pecking order because we come to church more faithfully than the next guy, or give more, or show up and do more . . . that somehow because of those things God should be *more* pleased with us. So maybe we're not all the way at the bottom of that ditch, but slip that way sometimes . . .

But the ditch on the other side of the road is just as bad. This is the ditch - called the *antinomian* ditch, or anti-law ditch, or anti-works ditch - which thinks that what I do doesn't matter at all. I can do whatever I want, I can sin as much as I want, because all that matters is that you believe and so Jesus will forgive you and it's all good. That's maybe the side of the road we Lutherans tend to slip into a bit more. And if you think that way, I think the prophet Zephaniah would like to have a word with you later! We don't want to be there either.

Both of these errors come, I think, from the thinking that Christianity is just about "getting into heaven" - and so you either have to be obsessed about doing enough to get yourself there, or you can live footloose and care-free because you know you're already there. *Woo-hoo!* But notice - in both of those pictures, those errors, those ditches . . . *where's Jesus?* Not really there, is He? Or if He is, He's not really all that important. It's all focused on me - what I have to do or don't have to do.

Which is really quite a minimalist view of the Christian life. One that I think has spilled over from other parts of our life. The "what is the least I have to do to get by" thinking that we tend to have. You know that thinking. It's: exactly how much dinner do I have to eat to get dessert? Exactly how clean do I have to get my room? Exactly how long does that school paper have to be? Exactly how much do I have to do to get that promotion? Exactly how much do I have to do to get into heaven . . . because I certainly want to make sure I don't do more than I have to!

Is that what the Christian life is all about? Really? Is that it? Or is that: it's my life and I want to do what I want, so let me get this out of the way? Again, *where's Jesus* in all that?

Instead, think about this parable of Jesus again. What do we know about the three servants and what was the difference between the first two and the third? Well, it seems to be this: **the first two had a completely different view of their master than the third.** The third one thought the master *a hard man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] scattered no seed*, and so someone to be *afraid* of. But while that is *his* opinion of his master, we don't know that to be true. In fact, it seems by his actions that the master is really quite the opposite of that. He freely gives to his servants quite a sum of money - even one talent was the equivalent of twenty years wages for a working man. And the first two servants don't seem concerned about what he will think when they return - if he expected an even greater return on investment than they got. You get the impression that they joyfully came before their master and was glad he was back. And he seems to be equally pleased with both of them and then doesn't just take what they have earned (because that's what he expected, after all), but gives them even more. So stingy? Hard? Dishonest? It just doesn't seem so.

And so it was their knowledge of the master that made all the difference in how they lived, waiting for him to return.

And so it is for you and I. Knowing your master, our Lord and Saviour, makes a difference and is reflected in how you live now. If you live in fear of punishment, that says something about what you believe about God. If you live thinking you have to earn His love and life, that is saying something. If you think you can selfishly take advantage of His love and forgiveness, sinning as much as you want, that speaks volumes, as does living in the joy and confidence of being a child of God. Knowing your Father in heaven and your Saviour and what He is like makes all the difference in the world.

So let us consider our Father in heaven. What kind of God is He? He is a giving God. All that you have is from your Father in heaven. If He didn't give it, you wouldn't have it. All is gift from Him for you to use and enjoy. To some He gives more and to some less, yes, as in the parable. But this, too, is good. He gives what He does because He knows you. Love does not treat everyone the same, but each person uniquely and individually. He gives you what you need, but not more than you can handle. And never because you deserve it - as we confess in the catechism: *all this He does only out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me*. Like in the parable, all gift.

Because what we *deserve* is . . . well, nothing. No gifts, no kindness, no consideration, no life. Only death. Because of our sin. Because we don't just slip into those ditches, do we? Sometimes we run and do cannonballs into those ditches. And live as if God - our generous, giving God - *did not matter and as if I mattered most*.

But then we find out more about our giving God - that to us He has not only given all that we have, He gave His Son. He does not turn away from us in our sin, but gives even more. And so Jesus came and gave His life for yours on the cross. To pull you out of the ditch, clean you, and set you on the road again. To take all that stuff we heard from Zephaniah - all the wrath, all the distress, all the ruin and devastation, all the darkness and gloom, all the anguish and weeping and gnashing of teeth that is by right yours, and to give you instead a new life to live - not in fear, but in confidence and joy in Him and all that He has done for you.

And as if that's not enough, He gives even more. For God has given you His Spirit, and with His Spirit the gift of faith, the forgiveness of sins, the promise of resurrection, and a life everlasting. That as His children, as His Church, we be free to live and use and enjoy all the gifts our Lord has given us, in the places He has put us. Not selfishly, or as if there were no God, nor as if there was some trick to it all because God is hard and demanding. No, but to care and give and love and serve - giving just as we have been so graciously given to. And knowing that you cannot possibly out give, out love, or out serve your Father in heaven. And living in such faith and joy now, being like those first two servants - joyful when our Lord returns, knowing that as His children, He is pleased with us.

Starting from that perspective, that understanding and faith of who our God is and what He has done and gives to us, **puts Jesus in the center of your life** and effects how you then live. It puts things into perspective - both our promised eternal life, **but also our life here and now**, that your Father wants you to enjoy too. Not in fear or in captivity to sin, but in love and freedom *from* sin. To live in His image. **Because what you do matters.** How you live matters. Not to get anything from God - He's already given you all things! But because your neighbor needs you - your children, your parents, your spouse, classmates, co-workers, and friends - and because how you live tells the world what you believe about your Father in heaven and what He is like. And so your Father gives to you, that you be like Him and give, too. Showing others His love and care and forgiveness. Not because you have to, but because that's who you are - a child of God. With His Spirit working in you.

And then when your brother Jesus returns, you will meet Him with the faith that you lived now, and enter into the joy *that you have already begun to receive here*. The joy of His forgiveness. The joy of His love. The joy of His freedom. The joy you enter into as your Saviour comes to you *already now* in His Supper. As Jesus comes to you in that same Body and Blood that will come on the last day, coming now still **to give** - to give you Himself, to give you the forgiveness and life and faith you need. To nourish and strengthen you. And this we joyfully proclaim until our waiting is over and He does come. Finally, once and for all - on the Last Day, and we enter into His kingdom. NOT because of how much you did, but because what you did, you did in faith. And so you too will hear those wonderful words: ***Well done, good and faithful servant. . . . Enter into the joy of your master.***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.