

“Between Then and Who Knows When”
Matthew 25:14-30
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The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is a remarkable collection of what we might call wisdom for the ages. That is not merely because it does speak about wisdom, as we heard last week about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. Nor is it because the three parables, taken as a whole, have much to do with the ages, that period of time between Jesus’ departure and his return during which we wait and hope. No, this is a remarkable chapter because it says so much about how to live the time between then and who knows when. In the pith of its three parables are three characteristics of the life of faithful disciples.

Before I say more about those three characteristics, and especially the one found in today’s parable, let me say something about this time I’m calling, “Between Then and Who Knows When.” As you will remember, Jesus’ disciples are interested in knowing more about the end game of Jesus’ life on earth. Some of them, we believe, were certain that he was God’s agent of reclamation of the nation of Israel and their people and so expected him to be rolling out some legions of angels, or at least some rabid partisans to kick out the Romans. And so, sensing the growing conflict between Jesus and the powers that be, and after they have heard him predict his own death three times now and the destruction of the temple, they say to him, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your

coming and of the end of the age?” And Jesus proceeds to share with them the signs they will need to look for, and the need for watchfulness, but he never quite answers their question. You see, I think they were looking for a specific date, or at least a range of dates in which they could expect this glorious day they had imagined. And yet Jesus leaves that itch unscratched, that urge to know unfulfilled, in favor of describing how they should be and live between the moment of their question, which is “then,” and his return in a truly unexpected way, which is the “who knows when.”

It seems clear from our reading of the rest of the Bible, that most people in the early church thought the “who knows when” was coming soon, any day, even after Jesus’ death and resurrection. And throughout the history of the church, there have been various groups who were certain of the same thing, and prepared themselves for Christ’s return on a specific date, whether the rollover of the first millennia or the second, or one of many other calculations of the incalculable. But despite our fondest wishes, and our best estimates, “who knows when” remains “God only knows when.” And we are left wondering what to do in the meantime, if we think about it at all, given that now so many years have passed since Jesus’ “predicted” his return. Indeed, I think we ought to be forgiven a lack of a sense of urgency since “who knows when” has been dragging on for quite a while now. Not that I mind. I’m pretty attached to this life, and although I’m sure it will be a grand and glorious event when Jesus does come again, I’ll be happy to watch it from the

heavenly sidelines with the rest of the saints who lived and died before that blessed event. Lord, just give me my span of years, and I'll be happy and faithful. I don't need the fireworks.

But of course at the same time, for us, our span of years, our lifetimes, as long or short as they may be, are also a time spent between then and who knows when. Jesus may be telling the disciples about a time distant in the future, but he is also telling them about the next few moments, hours or dragging days, the time in which life is lost in a thousand, small uncaring ways. We human beings have yet to discover a truly accurate predictor of the time of either our birth or our death, and so our personal "thens," and "who knows whens" remain a mystery to us, and a time of waiting and living. And just as fruitless as trying to calculate the end of the world is trying to calculate how much time we have left. It is a dangerous trap, one I fell into again this week, as I celebrated another birthday and began to think that I still had half my life left to live, at least if the current estimates of human lifespan are to be believed. Of course, I also thought that it must all be downhill from here if we are really talking about first halves and second halves. Knowing I may have forty-four more years is both a blessing and a curse, because in the "plenty of time" I may still have left is time to achieve but also to procrastinate, precisely because I still have plenty of time. But I also may have no time at all in which to achieve or procrastinate. With such uncertainty, how will I, how will you, live between now, and the inevitable "who knows when?" Therein lies the urgency in

the parables of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew.

The slaves who received vast sums of money from their master were living in that time between now and who knows when, just like the bridesmaids, those who would be sheep or goats, and indeed each one of us. There is a moment of judgment in each of these stories, when the person with the power decides on the worthiness of those of those without the power. They hear a variation of either, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave” or “As for this worthless slave, throw him out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” These words of judgment, both positive and negative, sound harsh to our ears, especially because the love and grace of God we celebrate is not supposed to depend on our achievements, or our wisdom, or even our good deeds. If doing even the wise thing, and burying one’s treasure was indeed the wise thing to do in that day and age, who can be saved? Where is God’s unmerited favor in this parable?

Let me suggest that focusing on that question is akin to the disciples focusing on a specific date for Christ’s return. You see, in each of the stories, the point is not really the moment of judgment, but rather the lifetime of opportunity. Yes, there is judgment in the end, but only because there is an end, even if we don’t know when it will be. But there is also plenty of grace and favor in these parables, if that is what we choose to focus on. Indeed, one of the common interpretations of this parable is that the third slave receives just what he expects to receive. He viewed the master as a harsh man, and then he experienced him as a

harsh man. If the disciples who first heard these parables, and we who hear them again today, think about them only in the context of whether or not we are measuring up, or how we will be judged, we will be burying the very same treasure the third slave so carefully buried in his back yard. If there is a message about judgment in these parables, it is that it will take care of itself if in the meantime we simply live as people who experience God's grace abundantly, living according to those three characteristics I promised to share with you.

And now, so that you will not be disappointed, broadly summarized, the characteristics of the life we are called to lead between "then and who knows when" are righteousness, risk-taking, and compassion. Last week, I spoke about Matthew's sense of preparedness as living an ongoing righteousness, that preparedness is not something to be gained easily or suddenly, but lived daily. In next week's lesson, the well-known parable of the sheep and the goats, the lesson is on compassion, recognizing and serving those in need, whether they are hungry, thirsty, lonely, sick, or in prison. The point of tonight's lesson, I believe, is that the life of faith is one in which risk-taking is essential, essential not just for a reward, but for our very lives themselves. Good stewardship of the gift of our lives demands more than the stagnation represented by burying it in the ground, even if that was the wisdom of that day. Rather, we are called to risk our very lives in the pursuit of doubling the blessing we have unexpectedly received, just like the money the slaves unexpectedly received.

Not only because I think the point of this parable is rather straightforward am I going to be brief tonight. I also want to be brief tonight because I want you to have no excuse not to spend time with our guests tonight, representatives of some of the ministries and missions ECF supports, learning about how they are doubling the blessing of their lives that they have received, how they are risking themselves in response to the grace they have received. Consider your conversations with them as the final, interactive part of this sermon. You see, just as the two slaves who were rewarded got busy, we too are called to plunge right in and make the most of whatever time we have, or have left, not because of the grace and favor we hope to receive, but because of the grace and favor we have already received. Go ahead, ask any one of our guests why they do what they do, and see if you can find anyone doing it in hopes of making it into the kingdom of heaven. My hunch is that, in one form or another, each will tell you that because they have already experienced the kingdom of heaven, they want to do everything that can that others may experience it too. May God bless us as we plunge right into the time between then and who knows when, tonight and forevermore. Amen.