St. Paul, Mount Vernon 11/15/26

Proper 28A
Judges 5: 1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11
Matthew 25: 14-30

Only a few times in our lives do we have a chance to do what is right. I mean really right, and for the good of all.

Between the years 1924 and 1950, Georgia Tann was the administrator of the Tennessee Children's Home Society. Run out of their office in Memphis, they found homeless children, and then adoptive families for those children. It was, on the outside, an outstanding business, and a service as well.

But their surface-level look was far different than how they were actually functioning. For the procurement of many of their children was done in devious ways. Many families who lived along the Mississippi River lived in poverty with little to eat and very poor living conditions. If consenting adults were gone (perhaps fishing or hunting in order to find food their families) Tann or her staff would take advantage of those missing parents to move in and take children who would be then adopted out to wealthy families for a large sum. Additionally, law enforcement aided Miss Tan in this lucrative business. During their stay in Tann's orphanage, children were mistreated and fed very little. It is estimated that during the 25 years of operation, some 5000 children were adopted from the Tennessee

Children's Home Society (some authentic adoptions for orphaned children, but many taken while their parents were away just so that Tann could make a profit.) And, sadly an estimated 500 of those children died from neglect – or lack of nutrition.

It's hard to miss the fact that Tann did not operate this deplorable business on her own. She had staff who must have gone home each night in deep conflict. And, the law enforcement who aided her and took part in capturing unwilling, frightened children, also were aware of what was happening. Citizens who saw Tann being chauffeured around in fancy limousines must have seen and wondered how she could afford such luxury, but no one questioned. Nobody did what was right. Why is it, when put in a position to make a difference would these individuals not act/not speak up?

This morning's gospel lesson is the second of three readings from Matthew from what is called "The Farewell Discourse." Jesus knew his time in this life was limited and his teachings gave his followers direction about right living after he was gone.

The master was going on a journey, and the servants are summoned. To each, according to his ability, he gave what was really his entire wealth. Important to remember that a Talent was a unit of mass representing one's wealth. It weighed about 75 pounds and represented about 15x the annual earnings of a laborer in

Jesus' day. So, the master, in essence, turned over his entire and substantial wealth to these three servants, then climbed into his Mercedes and headed for the hills. No instructions were given (at least none from Matthew's text) And we are left to wonder what *we* might do with that amount of wealth simply handed to us.

Upon his return, the master inquired into what was done with his "estate." Two servants made the same decision. They invested it/doubled its worth - a very good return (though we are not told for how long the master was away.) The master was thrilled with this, and the servant so happy about the invitation to be invited into the joy of the master. Their investment decisions were right, it seemed. But the third servant saw the master as a "harsh man" who reaped where he did not sow and gathered where he did not scatter – in other words, he was sly and took advantage of every situation, so how could anyone please such a master? Out of fear, the third servant buried his one talent until the master returned. Fearing he would lose it? Fearing someone would steal it? Fearing the master would disapprove of his investment choices? This way, he could simply hand it back, and say, there, I kept it safe and whole for you. But, the master was not happy "*You wicked and lazy slave…you should have known better…I would have liked to have had interest on my wealth…you are banished to the outer darkness with all the other teeth gnashers*! That seems a bit harsh to me, that response. I mean, he'd

kept the master's wealth, didn't lose it, and returned it to him with honesty upon his return.

Matthew used this Parable of Jesus to "yell" at the less-faithful of his time. There were false believers in the time of Matthew, those who followed the code of faith in word only. They dressed the part, said all the right words (much like the Pharisees) but they made life real difficult for the oppressed. They did damage to others, though they professed to be people of faith. They didn't use their authority for the right purposes. They neglected to act for the good of those who needed help. They contributed to the injustices of the day.
They didn't do the right thing when it was needed.

So, the parable probably isn't about money. It is probably not advising you about your 401k. Talents were just an illustration of something else. What if we were to think of the talents as representing our calling, or our faith? God calls to us in certain times, places, and positions to do certain things, to dip into the reservoir of our faith in God, to represent Christ in difficult situations, to be an influencer in the world, to use our voice as Christians. To some, God gives, perhaps, more opportunities, to others, less, but in the end, it is what we do with those opportunities, or how we use our faith, or how we "step up" that matters. It's about what we can each do in any given moment in any given place, that can clearly make a difference. Do we bury the chance, out of fear, or do we act?

Acting and speaking, especially when it is about mistreatment or subjugation of others, like the vulnerable children of the Tennessee Children's Home Society, is about justice, and, by our baptismal vows, I believe, we have little choice but to act to make things better. When the well-being of others is at stake, we are bound to act.

The third servant is most interesting because he buried his talent. He played it safe, and most of us understand that. Safe is… good. We often err on the side of caution, but this parable, I think, calls us to consider where we might better step up than play it safe.

Jesus taught his followers using this parable just before his arrest and crucifixion, both events that would proclaim and have proclaimed to us, all these years later, the world's habit of punishing those who speak truth to power. So, during a pretty poignant moment, he asked them, in this teaching, will they, given the chance to make a difference in the world, will they be his presence, especially in situations of injustice? Or, would they, in fear, bury the chance and play it safe? Are the opportunities God gives us so often enough for us to speak and act with boldness? How might we respond so that we make a difference?

Some of you, like me, saw the feature on KING TV this week, about the capture of the orcas in Budd Inlet, near Olympia, in 1976. Capturing orcas was permitted at that time, and a group from SeaWorld captured 6 orcas, chasing them

into nets. Using explosives, airplanes and chasing boats, the orcas were herded into the mud before being netted, all the while crying out in plaintive fear. Ralph Munro (later Secretary of State) was on a cruise with others and just happened to come upon the awful scene hearing the sounds of the orcas screaming., and they approached in their boat. The folks from SeaWorld justified what they were doing by saying they had permits, so it was legal. So, Munro and his group didn't try to stop them, but they also didn't leave. They stayed and took notes. And, when they got home, they called the press. And the press ran with the story. Channel 5 picked up the story and about 30 protest boats surrounded the capture pen when Sea World attempted more captures two days later. In the end, public opinion made a big difference, and Senator Warren Magnuson was able to amend the Marine Mammals Act which prohibited future commercial hunts. [1]Because of Munro and his group, a big difference in the lives of orcas was made. Munro's actions made a large difference. He could have avoided a good deal of harassment and legal mess by ignoring what he was seeing, but he acted.

Theodore Roosevelt once said, *"In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing."*

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[1] https://www.king5.com/article/news/history/1976-olympia-orca-capture-sparked-public-outcry-lawsuit-and-end-of-us-hunts-remembered-50-years-later/281-66d01b7e-22ae-4835-aacb-6c972d939a38

God calls us to do the right thing, and in the Parable of the Talent, Jesus calls us to do the same. When might there be opportunities for us, to not look away, but to act? May we be open and aware in any moment of decision, and may we do the right thing – particularly as it affects others.

May it be so.

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