



Matthew 25:14-30

Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
19 November 2023

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Last Thursday was the high, holy feast day of Red Cup Day at Starbucks. For those of you outside the know, this is the day when you can order a holiday drink and get a special reusable red holiday cup at Starbucks. As I often do, I planned ahead, because one can never have too many red reusable holiday cups which might defeat the purpose of a reusable cup but let's save that discussion for another day. So last Thursday, I placed my mobile order from my phone so I would not have to wait in line once I arrived at Starbucks. I ordered two drinks – one for myself and one for Pastor Tony so that I would get two holiday cups – but don't Tell Pastor Tony – I kept his holiday cup for myself – sometimes you need a red cup at home and sometimes at the office. I walked into the Starbucks and was met with a line of people. But, because I ordered ahead, I bypassed the line and walked up to the counter. When I got to the counter there was woman standing in front of the counter like she owned the place. I politely said excuse me and reached out for my drinks that were waiting to be picked up. I picked up the first drink and then grabbed the two empty red cups sitting next to my drinks and the woman looked at me and said, "are you sure those are yours?" Caught off guard I replied, "well I think so – they were sitting next to my drink." "Well, how come you are taking two red cups, when you bought only one drink," she asked. Now people are starting to take notice. And I am trying to decide how far down this rabbit hole I want to venture. It is only 8:30 in the morning. There are plenty of holiday red cups lined up on the counter. Am I missing something? Is this woman a red cup policewoman? Is there a holiday cup crimewave happening at Starbucks across the globe today? What are the chances I would run into this cranky, needed her coffee two hours ago, move out of the way, do you know who you are talking to, self-identified coffee-counter crossing guard at my Moreland and Delafield Favorite Starbucks location? But – you would be proud of your pastor. Remembering that she was a child of God, I looked her in the eye and said with only the slightest hint of sarcasm, "actually, ma'am, forgive me, but you are standing in front of my second drink!" I reached in front of her picked up my second drink and headed for my car. Now, imagine my surprise, when I got into my car – put my drink into the cupholder and looked at Pastor Tony's drink only to realize I had picked up someone else's drink. Mercy – what to do now? Drive off? Return to face the coffee counter crossing guard? Pretend I ordered Pastor Tony the wrong drink under the wrong name?" So, I went back into my favorite Starbucks to face the music. I walked up the counter and gently placed the second drink back on the counter and ever-so inconspicuously picked up Pastor Tony's drink and made a beeline for the door – only to be met by the coffee counter crossing guard once again. What are the chances? Except this time, we shared no words – only smiles as I held the door open for to get on with her day. I hope she remembered to pick-up her holiday red cup. God knows, I was not going to remind her! Lady, you are on your own! Vaya con Dios!

¹⁴⁻¹⁸ "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money. ¹⁹⁻²¹ "After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.' ²²⁻²³ "The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment. His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.' ²⁴⁻²⁵ "The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.'

To hear the end of this story is to know that the man was pleased with the first two servants who doubled his money with investment and angry with the third servant who simply held on to the money and returned it down to the last cent. I have often preached on this parable with accusation of wrongdoing by the third servant



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who did not invest and grow the money of his master. Though I wonder if I have been wrong all along. What does it mean that the third servant was thrown into the outer darkness for simply protecting his master's property? For the longest time, I would tell you that the talents were the amount of faith given to each of you. What you did with that faith was your investment or protection of the good news of the love of God. Did you tell others of the promise of eternal life? Did you share the love of God with others? Truth be told the master was greedy. Make me more money. Was there any concern for the life of the servant? How had the master treated the servants all along? In truth, all three servants act out of fear. God knows, we have plenty of examples of pastors and churches through the ages who have shared the power of God's "righteous" anger. Who among us can speak to a moment of religious abuse at the hands of an overeager pastor dishing out the anger of God to us? Divorce. No. You must stick it out in this marriage. Abuse. Sorry. God wants you to stay in this relationship. Poor. Too bad. God needs you to give more money to the church. Too busy. So was Jesus when he was dying on the cross for your sins. Okay – the last one I may have used at one time or another. But you get the idea. There has been - there is no shortage of using God to guilt you or force you into doing something "in the name of God" for the church. Except, I do not think that is what God had in mind.

I know what Matthew is trying to do. Matthew writes down this parable of Jesus because he wants to remind the people he is writing to that Jesus will return. The Jewish temple has been burned to the ground by the Romans and Matthew hopes to convert more Jews to the promise of Christianity in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Matthew also wants to inspire the newly planted Christian communities throughout the empire to spread the message of the saving power of Jesus. The challenge for the Jews is that there is still little agreement that Jesus is the Messiah. And for the Christians, Jesus has been gone long enough that very few people are still around who saw Jesus in the flesh before his ascension into heaven. How does Matthew convince the Jews that Jesus is the Messiah? How does Matthew convince the Christians to live out the story of their faith in Jesus? Well...¹⁴⁻¹⁸ "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. What will you do with the faith given to you?"

When Ileen and I were married, the pastor preached on John, Chapter 2 – the wedding at Cana where Jesus turns water into wine. It was fitting, as my father-in-law had purchased enough wine for every one of the 550 guests to have their own bottle in the months leading up to the wedding so we would not "run out." During the sermon, the pastor brought out 6 stone jars to remind us of the stone jars Jesus commanded to be filled with water in order that the miracle of water into wine could occur. Our pastor spoke of each of the jars filled with things we would need in our marriage: patience, forgiveness, grace, love, intimacy, and faith. Reminding us that each of the jars Jesus had filled with water were 6 feet tall. That's a lot of patience, forgiveness...he said. I was happy to hear that it was not up to my wife or myself to fill those jars – that Jesus had done the hard work of providing the things we needed to help us succeed or survive in our marriage. The same is true of the talents or money given to each of the servants. The master's intentions may have been questionable, but his servants already had a measure of faith gifted to them by their master. How the servants tended that measure of faith was up to them.

So, my friends, what's in your holiday red cup? People of God - you are not responsible for creating the faith within you – those seeds were planted long before you were born. But how you use what God has given you – that is entirely your gift back to God. Some will hold their faith close – keeping it private, hidden, away from the eyes of the world. Some will never stop talking about their Savior. Some will carry their seeds of faith with them into every home and hospital room they visit. I will argue there is not one right way to tend the seeds God has given you – the only wrong – is to not tend the seeds at all. So, my friends, welcome to the garden, make yourselves at home, there's lots of life here, you're never quite alone. Thanks be to God! Amen.