

Pentecost 24A + November 19, 2017

Matthew 25:14-30

Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI

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As I consider the possibility of a full-time call, and you discern what comes next, you may think that Atonement Lutheran Church is at a crossroads. In fact, that is the title we came up with at Council for the pastoral conversation that Bishop Mary Froiland is coming to have with us at noon on December 9. “Lunch with the Bishop: Atonement Lutheran Church at a Crossroads.”

In fact, Bishop Mary was here this past Monday to talk with us, and spoke at some length about the idea of closing. She is not encouraging this. The synod does not make any decisions on behalf of congregations. She just wanted you to know more about what that means, what’s involved, and how to get there if that’s what you decide. But because the turnout wasn’t what we had hoped, she offered to come back to continue the conversation. Please plan to be here if humanly possible. Lunch will be served—free food! It’s not every church who gets to host the bishop twice in the space of just a few weeks.

But the more I thought about this image of a crossroads, the less sense it made. The notion presumes that you will make a choice to go either straight ahead or to turn left or right.

Apply that to the life of this or any congregation. What do we assume going straight ahead means? Continuing on the journey as planned presumably means growth—

plowing forward, making progress, increasing the numbers. However, this is the prosperity gospel way of thinking, in which bigger and richer means better. Jesus never said anything like that—in fact, he said the opposite, that the last would come first and the meek would inherit the earth. Yes, churches need some money and people, but success in God’s sight lies in the faithfulness of the community, not in its numbers.

Back at the crossroads, turning left or right would mean a sudden change of course. As we know, change in church life is never sudden. It must happen gradually and deliberately, or things will fall apart.

So, is Atonement at a crossroads? I think that image is wrong. A better metaphor for your discernment at this moment is that of stewardship. Today’s Gospel reading is perfect for that purpose.

Here we have a wealthy master who is going off on a long trip. Before he leaves, he entrusts certain amounts of his money to each of three servants, according to their abilities. One talent was roughly equivalent to \$1 million today. The master is prosperous because he has worked hard all his life, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seed, which may have made him a tough taskmaster.

The master gives his servants no specific instructions. But he already has in mind how each will care for this money. After he leaves, the first two servants successfully invest their millions and double the amounts—from 5 to 10 million, and from 2 to 4. The third, on the other hand, is afraid of losing the money so he buries it for safekeeping.

What happens when the master returns is just what you'd expect: He applauds the first two servants and chastises the third. "If you'd even just put it in the bank, at least it would have earned some interest," the master yells at him. And he's thrown into the outers darkness, along with all those other characters in Matthew's gospel who act in ways that oppose the kingdom of God.

This is a parable about stewardship, but not in that common understanding of the word as giving money. Applied to the life of Atonement, it's about caring well for that which God has entrusted to you as a body, and individually as members of that body.

It's about working faithfully, using the gifts God has given each of you while we all await the return to earth of Jesus Christ—which, as Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians, will surprise us like a thief in the night. Last week's story of the 10 bridesmaids was about being prepared for Jesus' return. Here, we are invited to ask: What are we doing in the meantime with the gifts we've been given? Have we been using them in a way that pleases God, or have we buried them in the ground?

Put the question of money and membership aside, which is how the world wants you to measure success. Instead, consider the mighty river of abundant gifts returned to God in greater measure that has flowed through this church since its founding:

- The visionaries who decided Beloit needed an English-speaking Lutheran Church on the city's East side.
- The construction workers and craftspeople who built this magnificent neo-Gothic structure and elegant sanctuary, and built it to last, and all the artists, and landscapers who have adorned it inside and out.

- The people who envisioned building addition, the parking lot, and the lift, figured out how to pay for them.
- The pastors and musicians who have faithfully served here.
- Those who stepped up to take on the role of Council president, sometimes again, and again, and again, and who led Atonement into the enviable position long ago of being debt-free.
- All the Council members who have served single and repeated terms and so lovingly take care of the business of the church.
- The Sunday School superintendents and teachers who opened the story of God to hundreds, maybe thousands of young minds. The young people in C today
- The cooks and other volunteers who have prepared meals and fund-raisers, and the custodians who have cared for the property.
- All who were born here, grew up here, went to Sunday School here. All who were confirmed here, married here, and whose children who did the same. Those who gave their lives to this body of Christ, and were buried in the midst of this community.
- And, of course, all those who have supported this congregation financially and in so many other ways with gifts of time and materials.

These are riches beyond measure, pearls without price, all due to the faithful exercise by those who came before of the gifts God had given them. Jesus' parable of the talents invites you to live in an attitude of abundance, not one of scarcity. Allow yourselves to live there, and wisdom will follow.

What has God entrusted to you? The rich history of this congregation. This marvelous building and all that it contains. A legacy of many lifetimes of loving God and trusting him in all things. Your own ideas, energy, and creativity. The faith that has grown in each of you and within his body into a mighty oak, a vast network of branches spanning generations. "For to all who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance."

What will you do with this abundance? There's one thing of which I'm certain: You will not be like the third servant, the one who was fearful and angry, burying his talent in the ground and blaming his master: "My failure is all your fault. Take back what you gave me."

No. When you reach that time of reckoning, you will say to God, "See what we have done with what you have given to us!" and God will reply in a loud and loving voice, for all the host of heaven to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servants. You have been trustworthy in these things. Now I will put you in charge of even more."

AMEN.