

“Active Waiting”  
Matthew 25:14-30

November 19, 2017

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

“Hurry up and wait” is a phrase that some say originated in the armed forces sometime in the 1930s. However, it’s a phrase that applies to many situations in civilian life as well. It describes a situation where an important event is about to take place which requires urgency and readiness on the part of those who were to take part in it. However, the event doesn’t happen right away for some reason and so one must wait, rather passively, while doing nothing, until the event takes place. Hurry up (Get excited)...and wait (sit around and do nothing).

It’s a phrase that might come to mind as we consider the end times and Jesus return. We are reminded that this is an exciting event and that we should be actively preparing for it with a sense of urgency. However, at the same time, we are also told to wait. To many, this implies sitting around and doing nothing until Jesus returns.

This kind of thinking has arisen several times in the history of the Church. In the Bible, the people in Thessalonica believed Jesus was coming any minute and were quite excited. They could hardly wait. So they sold all that they had and sat around, waiting for Jesus to return. After a while, when it was apparent Jesus was not returning soon, they began to sponge off their neighbors because they had sold all their possessions. This is why St. Paul encouraged them in second Thessalonians not to sit around and do nothing by saying, “if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.”

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a group called the Millerites (predecessors of the Jehovah’s Witnesses) did the same thing. Believing that Jesus was about to return, they stopped working, donned white robes, and went up on the hills or the mountains near their homes to sit around, do nothing, and wait for Jesus to appear. Many other sects have believed the same thing and done similar things: “Hurry up and wait.”

Although we may not sell all that we have, climb up a mountain (even though we have many here in Montana), and watch for Jesus coming, we may think the same as some of these groups. Since Jesus is coming, we will “hurry up and wait”. We will be excited. We will eagerly anticipate Jesus return. And while we do, we will do nothing. However, Jesus tells a parable in our Gospel reading for today that refutes this kind of thinking and shows exactly what we are to be doing WHILE we wait.

Jesus’ parable is about a man going on a long journey to a distant place. While he was gone, he wants his work to continue. So, he calls his slaves to do this. Let us be clear on this, these are not outsiders or merely hired hands. These are people for whom the master has paid a high price. These are people that the man owns. Unlike our concept of slavery in 19<sup>th</sup> century America, these slaves were granted significant privileges and important responsibilities. Here, they would be asked to do their master’s work.

The master does not simply choose the best slaves or his favorite slaves. He chooses slaves with various abilities. They are not all the same. To each of them, according to their individual abilities, the master grants the resources for doing the job.

It is the master's (and only the master's) resources that will be used to do the job. The slaves are not required to bring anything in to this task, except for their hard work and faithfulness.

And such elaborate resources does the master give his slaves. To one slave he gives five talents, to another slave two talents, and to another slave one talent. One commentator said that a talent is equivalent to 20 years wages. So, one slave receives 100 years wages, another 40 years wages, and another 20 years wages.

While the master was gone on his journey, the slaves were left to do his work with the generous resources given to them. After a long time, the master returns and calls for an accounting of his slaves' work. His basis for judgment is interesting. He doesn't judge the slaves on the basis of success or failure. He commends two servants for being "good and faithful," even though they produced different amounts. The one who would received a lot produced a lot: five more talents. The one who received less produced less: two more talents. Yet both were lavishly praised by their master for doing a good job.

The third slave is condemned and punished, not for lack of success or because he did something wrong, but for lack of faithfulness and because he did nothing. He did not use the resources given to him for doing the master's work, but he simply did nothing. He is called "worthless" and is cast into the outer darkness, a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The man in the story – the master – represents Jesus. After dying on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus went on a long trip: He ascended into heaven. But He wants His work to continue, even while He is gone. And what is that work? It is the work of bringing salvation to people of all nations. It is giving people forgiveness for their sin and the peace which that brings. It is rescuing people from death and the grave by giving them new and eternal life. It is giving people victory over hell and the devil by giving them homes in heaven.

Jesus has already completed the work of acquiring these blessings by offering his life as sacrifice on the cross for the sin of the world and earning forgiveness for all that sin. He has demonstrated this victory by rising to life, leaving behind an empty tomb, and giving new life over and giving an eternal home in heaven in place of an empty grave. The work that needs to be done is the delivery of these blessings to all people everywhere by the proclamation of this Good News, the Gospel, so that they might believe in Jesus, trust in Him for all of these blessings, and receive what Jesus has earned by His death on the cross and by His resurrection from the tomb.

THAT is what He has left for His slaves to do. This is not a job for outsiders or mere hired hands. Jesus has redeemed you, that is, He has purchased you so that you might belong to Him. You are his own. You were baptized into His name and born again as His dear children. You have received forgiveness for all of your sins and are living a new life which will continue past the grave into the joy of heaven where Jesus has prepared a place specifically for you.

As His dearly loved children and valued servants, you and I are privileged to serve Him and continue His work of bringing all people to Him that they might receive the same wonderful blessings that we have experienced. Of course, neither you nor I

are worthy of such an honor on our own merit or talented enough to do this most important work by ourselves. Yet Jesus chooses each and every one of us here, regardless of how talented you may or may not be.

Yet Jesus (and only Jesus) provides the necessary resources to do this job. We do not depend on our own power, intelligence, or skills to convert people to faith in Jesus Christ. Instead, Jesus gives us the resources – the Word of God and Sacraments – to get the job done. He does not overburden us with things that we cannot do, but gives these gifts in accordance with each of our talents. Some receive more resources (e.g. pastors) and some have fewer resources (e.g. a child who has learned a Bible verse or two). But, ALL of us, by virtue of our baptisms, have received resources to do the work, as well as opportunities to do the work.

As in the story, Jesus has been gone a long time. While that may disappoint us, it is certainly good news for us in our service. There has been plenty of time to faithfully serve the Lord, as well as plenty of time to repent of being unfaithful in our service of the Lord and to change. However, when Jesus does return, there will be an accounting of ALL people, not just the pastors and professional church workers, but every single Christian.

While this shouldn't frighten us, it often does. However, that is only because we look to ourselves and external ways of judging what we have done. The good news is that Jesus does not judge your work in service to Him on the basis of how successful you were – how many converts you made, how many people you lead to Jesus, how many new members you brought into church, and so on. His Word is strong enough to do the work effectively. The Lord says, "My Word 'shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.'" (Isaiah 55:11) That takes all of the pressure and stress off of us.

God will evaluate your service on the basis of whether you were faithful in using the resources you received in the situations where God has placed you. He will not condemn you for lack of success (as measured in human terms) or lesser success than any fellow Christian. He will only condemn you if you are unfaithful in using the resources given to you for this important job – if you do nothing and only hide and bury your resources. If that is what you choose to do, you will be cast out of the kingdom of heaven and into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, be a faithful servant in this important task to which God has called every one of you. To do the job means you have to have the resources. So, get the resources – the Word of God and the Sacraments. You cannot use what you do not have. You cannot share what you are not experiencing. You cannot deliver the blessings which you are not receiving yourself.

Be where the resources are. Be in church in order to receive the Word of God and all of its blessings: forgiveness for the conscience, strength for the faith, and hope for the future. Be in the Word of God around the kitchen table as you meditate, share, and pray with your family at mealtime. Be in the Word of God at your nightstand as you do the same with the Word of God there.

Having been strengthened by these wonderful resources of our Lord, then use those resources faithfully as God places people and provides opportunities for you to speak to them about their Savior's love. Direct people to the Sacraments – Holy Baptism or the Lord's Supper when it is appropriate and where there is a need. Trust in the power and the promise of the Word of God, as well as the presence of the Holy Spirit, to do the real heavy lifting in this transaction.

Be faithful and do this always, even when you are afraid or feel uncomfortable in doing so. And when you are unfaithful (and each of us is that one time or another), return to the resources of Word & Sacraments and make use of them for your own needs for forgiveness, restoration, strength, and renewed joy in serving our Lord. Having been strengthened and renewed, you are ready to return to service.

As we eagerly wait for our Lord's return, we do more than just "hurry up and wait". We are active in doing the Lord's work with the Lord's resources through the Lord's power until the Lord comes again. Rejoice in the honor and privilege to which you have been called in this endeavor. Celebrate the successes which the Word of God allows you to see and experience. Do not be discouraged or disheartened because of perceived lack of success or less success than another Christian. Simply be faithful while waiting, eager in doing, and rejoicing greatly when the Lord finally returns and says to you, "Well done, good and faithful servant." Amen