

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Lectionary 33A, November 19, 2023
Psalm 90. Matthew 25
An Accounting

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this sermon is Psalm 90 — especially verse 10. In the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version, it begins this way:

The years of our life are threescore and ten,
or even by reason of strength fourscore; (Psalm 90:10,
RSV)

Well, threescore and ten adds up to 70, and I am now 72! The last time this Psalm came up, I was a mere 69. But now, I have lived to see my threescore and ten years and I am delighted by it. My parents died young. They were really good people, in my opinion — two of the many anonymous saints on earth. But they died young. My father died at age 45. My mother died at age 54. But here I am at 72 years of age and I am grateful for it. I am glad to still be around to try to help my family and my congregation. I am just kind of tickled to have reached age 72. So I want to look at this Psalm 90. It is a very moving Psalm.

But first, let's take a quick look at our Gospel Lesson — Matthew 25. It is called the Parable of the Talents. One fellow was entrusted with five talents. Another fellow with two talents and to another, one. The Bible says that the talents were entrusted to “each according to his ability.” Then the master went away. But he returned. Naturally he returned. He came back in order to settle accounts with his servants. That should have been obvious to them. The master is going to return and then there will be an accounting.

I am particularly interested in the fellow who had but one talent. I am interested in him because that includes each of us. Some of you have more than one talent, some of you have five talents, but each of us has at least one talent and this parable asks us to question ourselves: “Have we been using our talents well? Or have we been burying our talents?”

It is the teaching of St. Paul that there is a variety of gifts in the church. As I read his words please note his saying about “To each”:

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one. ⁷*To each* is given the

manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1
Corinthians 12:4-7, RSV)

I look out over this congregation, and sure enough, I am glad to know of many, many gifts among you all.

But St. Paul says we *all* have at least *one* gift. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the holy gift of love. And whatever our other gifts — our preaching or teaching or prophesying, or administration or whatever — St. Paul wants us to use those gifts for the building of the church. And remember that we all have at least the holy gift of love.

Have we been using our gift well, to help build up the church and win souls to Christ? That is the chief thing laid upon every Christian: we want to save souls. So we all have at least the gift of love that we should use to try to draw other people toward Christ in His holy church. We all have one gift.

The problem with this fellow in the parable is that he buried his gift. He did not destroy it. He just buried it. He didn't do anything useful with it. And the master is furious about this. He gives direction to cast that worthless servant into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. So that's pretty serious.

Applying it to you and me, we all have gifts — holy gifts, spiritual gifts granted to us by God. And our congregation has greatly benefited from the gifts of people in our congregation. But let us try to reckon with the idea that we all have at least the gift of love by which we can try to build up Christ's Church on earth. And it is a matter of importance to the master. Whether we have used our gift — that is a matter of importance to Jesus. Have we been using our gifts to help build up the church. If not, it is high time that we turn to that task.

All right. So that is my quick look at the parable. Now I want to return to Psalm 90:

The years of life or threescore and ten or even by reason
of strength fourscore;

It is pretty good when somebody lives that long. I think we can say that that person has had fullness of years. And yet there are extraordinary reminders in Psalm 90 that our threescore and ten years or even fourscore years is pretty brief compared to eternity. I mean, in the scale of things, you might have 80 years here or even more. That's nice. But eternity is so much bigger. And that is what is on my heart. I want us to be thinking about eternity. I cannot think of a more practical subject. I cannot think of a more important cause for which we should use our rationality.

Look at verse 4 in the Psalm:

For a thousand years in thy sight
are but as yesterday when it is past,
or as a watch in the night. (Psalm 90:4, RSV)

A thousand years — that is a mighty long stretch of time. I mean, all of American history does not add up to 1000 years. We have our colonial age. We have the historic Declaration of Independence and the War of Independence. We have the Civil War. We have Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. We have the present political scene. All of that is less than thousand years. In a thousand years, empires can rise and they can fall. Great people can come and go — great composers and authors and artists and playwrights in that stretch of time. A thousand years is a huge length of time for us humans. But then our Psalm comes along and says that for God and compared to eternity, a thousand years are but as yesterday which has past. It is a brief time for God. It is a brief time in eternity.

So, we have our threescore and ten years or by virtue of strength fourscore or even more to get ready for eternity.

The Psalm draws a great conclusion:

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom. (Psalm 90:12, RSV)

The psalm is asking us to be mindful that life really is rather short. And it is the time given to us to prepare for eternity now.

When we speak of eternity, we are speaking of Jesus. We are speaking of the master who is going to return and who is going to be very interested in how we have used our gifts. For us, there is no understanding of eternity apart from Jesus. I mean when we have the resurrection of the dead, we are not resurrected to just age after age of life. No. The important thing is that we are resurrected to life with Jesus. We are resurrected into a kingdom called the kingdom of God. It is a kingdom gathered around Jesus, and Jesus cares passionately whether we have been trying to save souls for whom he died.

So just as the master in the parable returned, so Jesus is going to return. We say it in the creed.

On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come
again to judge the living and the dead.

And we pray for this. We pray for it all the time — even in today's service:

Thy kingdom come. (Lord's Prayer, KJV)

We will pray for it in our Eucharistic prayer:

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. (Eucharistic Prayer I, LBW)

We are praying for the return of Jesus. We are praying that Jesus will return and become the Mayor of New York City. We're praying that Jesus will come and become the King of all creation. We're praying for that. We want the master to return. But when he comes, he is going to enquire how we have been using our gifts.

So the Psalm says, teach us so number our days, that we will acquire a heart of wisdom. That is, teach us so number our days that we are mindful of the return of Jesus and the account that we must give to him. I do not know what he is going to answer any one of us. But I firmly believe that it is the teaching of the Bible that we are going to have to give an account to him.

We are speaking of eternity. Threescore and ten years or fourscore years is nice, but they are rather small compared to eternity. These years are the time of our service to Christ. These years are our time for the spiritual adventure of using our love and whatever other gifts we have for the upbuilding of the Church.

So, let us heed today's Psalm and so number our days that we acquire a heart of wisdom, so that we will live a good life and will try to make ourselves ready for when Jesus returns. And to Him be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.