Homily – November 15, 2026

I now know why Pastor Lesley chose this day to have me preach. We've got distress because of the day of the Lord. We've got—oh, and then this. All right, pray for me, Pastor.

First of all, greetings to you from the Lutheran Church of Honolulu, where I was just two days ago. They said, "Say hi to the folks in Kihei." So hello from them. Next Sunday, I will be with Emmanuel in La Habra for an ordination. Can I bring your greetings to them? So great. Good.

All right, so this parable, I think this is one of two of the most misunderstood parables in all of Scripture. So I'm going to try and help us understand it in some context and see if we can tease out some good news, because I do believe there's good news in here. We're going to get there.

First thing is we have two problems. The first problem is we have a different worldview than the worldview of Jesus and his disciples, first-century Palestine as an oppressed people. That's not our world that we grew up in. And so we grew up in a different context. That's our first challenge.

The second challenge is the meaning of the word talent. Talent for us means gifts and skills, certain things that you can do. And that's where this sermon could easily follow the path of many others, even ones that I've preached in my history that really missed the mark of this text. Because we could say, "So God's given you skills and gifts, and your job is to invest them." That's not a bad idea. It's not that it's not true, but that's not what this text is about.

Let me tell you what a talent is. I mean, typically, by the way, we use that at stewardship time, like we just did the pledges, right? So, there's this one, and the widow's mite oftentimes comes around at stewardship time. And that's the other one that we misunderstand so much. So what is a talent? A talent in that time is a year's wage, right? So that's what it meant.

So, this is not a little amount of money. I looked up online. The average full-time employed income in the state of Hawaii is $79,351. That's the average full-time income currently. Do you know what it is in Maui? Who wants to guess?

You're going the right direction.

$131,649. And if that's not your income, that means that someone else is making a whole lot more than you, because that's the average. That's the average in Maui.

So let's just play with this for a second. To one person, this landowner, this person, gave $658,245. That was the five talents. To the other one, he gave $263,298. That's the two talents. And then to this one, he gave $131,649.

It doesn't sound like when he comes back and says, "You've been faithful in a few things," that these are actually a few things. This is a lot of money. Furthermore, he ends up with a net profit of 100% almost, except for the guy with the one talent. And whatever the time span was that he was gone, he made $921,543. That's a good yield on investment, right?

And so we get to the problem of this parable. How are you going to make that kind of return on investment in a short period of time in that part of the world? And the answer is, you had to participate in what was an unjust economic system. Jesus says that they went out and they traded it. By trading it in that world, what you had to do was you had to find ways in which you could indebt certain people who had farms and then foreclose on them and then maximize and sell those properties. That was the way in which that sort of thing would happen. That's the only way you could make that kind of money.

It is wealth creating wealth, which Mahatma Gandhi said, by the way, is one of the seven deadly sins, is wealth without work, when we get money just from making money. And Buddhists taught right livelihood is one of the Eightfold Paths: that the way in which we earn our living is spiritually in sync with who we are and what we say is important to us.

So I want to offer you a little bit of a different interpretation of this. First of all, this is looking at it from the lens of an indigenous scripture. Scripture is written, and Jesus himself is an indigenous person. He is a person of the ʻāina, of that land that's there. That's why most of his parables have to do with planting and harvesting and looking at what the earth is teaching, because he's part of a culture that's very deeply connected to it. A lot of these things are not analogies for him. In fact, they're just the ways in which wisdom gets revealed through the created world.

And so think about it. This person who gets the one talent, he doesn't want to play in the system of trading in an unjust economic world. And so what does he do? As a farmer, he plants it. He puts it in the ground. And then he pulls it up later. And the commentary of this scripture is, "You see this money? It's not even as valuable as seed. Because seed will create something that's different. But this right here, it's just a thing. So here, take it back."

He gives it back. You see, what's happening is a conflicting worldview. There's the worldview that says money should be able to be leveraged to make as much money as you possibly can. It's nascent capitalism in a way. And you've got the indigenous farmer understanding that says, "No, money is just—it's just a, what do I want to say? It's only got the value that we agree and we put to it. But what really matters is food, plants, connection, sharing." This is the real economy that exists.

Second misunderstanding. We oftentimes think of the boss here, the landowner, and we say, "Well, that's God, right?" Nowhere in this parable does it say that the boss is God. In fact, we know a couple things about this person. The man who gets the one talent comes back and he says, "I knew you were harsh, reaping where you did not sow"—hear the agrarian thing again—"and harvesting where you did not scatter." And the guy says, "Oh, if you knew that about me, why didn't you just put it in the bank?"

Do you know that there are over 40 places in Scripture that say, "Do not lend or take interest on money"? So this guy already is saying—so that's the big giveaway, that this is not God. This landowner is instead a representative of, "This is the way the world works."

Homily – November 15, 2026

It's the only way that I can make sense of this crazy, un-Jesus-y line that Jesus says: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." That makes no sense to me from the perspective of everything else that Jesus teaches, unless we understand that what he's saying is, "This is the way the world actually is, but it's not the kingdom of God."

This is one of those parables that does not say, "The kingdom of God is like this." It says, "For it is as if," it starts off, which is a way of Jesus saying, "This is the system that we're all a part of, and we need to think about a different system."

It's a bad day for Farmer Joe, though. He not only gets the speech and what he had taken away, but then he gets thrown out into the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. We know that that's actually what happens to people who are not connected to money and power in the world, that oftentimes they get run over by systems that they have little control over, and that that's the way the world continues to go.

The poor guy is thrown into a different space. However—and here's the good news. There is good news. Matthew 25. I'm going to show off my seminary education. Matthew 25 has three stories: the parable of the ten virgins, this story, and then what you're going to hear next week, which is the great judgment, the sheep and the goats.

In that story, we find this good news. Look what Jesus says happens to people who are thrown into the outer darkness. He says, "When you see someone who's hungry and you feed them, when you see someone who's naked and you clothe them, when you see someone who's in prison and you go visit them, when you see someone who is cast into outer darkness and you welcome them back in, then you are participating in the kingdom of God."

Do you see how this story of the talents is a setup for the next story, which is of the great judgment? In other words, the system of the world is not the system of the kingdom of God. Though if you win the rat race, you're still a rat.

But the good news is, whether you win or, for the vast majority of the human family, when you lose and when you're trampled by a system that does not care about you but only cares about your bank account—when you are part of that world, God goes after the ones in the outer darkness. God finds us when we are in our broken place. God helps us exorcise the demon of consumption and to get that out of us so that we can participate in the kingdom of God.

Thank you. I got an amen from the dog there.

Our culture is obsessed with return on investment. We worship wealth and celebrity and status, and it can lead us to play the same game only to get ahead because we imagine that God is the same way. But I am here to proclaim to you, with all the witness of the gospel, that that is not God. God instead has a different set of values. God invites us to more.

Jesus called this abundant life, which is neither longevity nor prosperity, but intensity. In Pidgin, to the max, right? Abundant life is infused with meaning and purpose. It's having the scales taken away from our eyes when a culture is constantly telling us that you are what you own, you are your bottom-line bank account, and says, "No, no, no, no, no. Do you know who you are? You are a daughter of the Most High God. You are a son of the Creator of the universe. You are a masterpiece."

When I was in a church in San Diego for a while—you know, we often start in the Lutheran church with confession and forgiveness, and we confess our sins. Well, for a season of Easter, for six weeks, I had the congregation confess, but not their sins. We confessed our blessedness. So I had a liturgy produced, and people would say, "I confess unto God that I am a work of art, that I'm amazing, that I'm created in God's very image."

And you've never seen a group of Lutherans squirm more than when they had to say that they were beautiful, that they were works of art. But you are. You are. All of us are. You are created exactly the way God wants you to be, and you matter even when the world says you don't, even when your internal critic says you don't.

And so we come back again and again to this space to get our glasses cleaned. You know, since I've gotten older, I have to wear these to read. And sometimes I have no idea how dirty they are until I put them on my face. And then I realize that they're not helping. And so this is a good analogy for how our glasses get dirty. We don't see things as they are. We see them as we are, right?

So instead, we have to come here. We gather in the community. We experience the aloha. We hear again about a God who loves us, and then we receive this very God in the form of bread and cup. And then hopefully the glasses get clean for us to be able to see the way the world really is, that all of us matter, that all of us have a role to play. We begin by loving ourselves and our neighbors, by breaking bread together, specifically at this table.

So this congregation is in a revisioning process. So one of the things that we need to do is collectively get our collective glasses clean. Look again. Look again. That's what revision means, is to look again.

Look again at how much God loves you as you are right now, without concern for how much you have returned on God's investment. Look again at the call and the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ to be and to preach good news to all the mess-ups, the losers, the outcasts, and the oddballs that we all can be.

Look again at the abundance that's given to us in this time and in this place. And instead of thinking of things as a scarcity, just imagine how much we already have. And then look again at each other as we gather or come to this holy table. See the miracle that is sharing the bread and the cup with the miracle that is you.

Homily – November 15, 2026

God is not a bean-counting, money-hungry tyrant. God is the vulnerable one who suffers with us and calls us together again at this welcome table. Amen.