A sermon preached by the Rev. Jeanne Leinbach
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Proper 28, Year A

Our story is both pain and possibility. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, shared this message with us last weekend. Our story is both pain and possibility. Bishop Curry talked about Pauli Murray, a civil rights activist. Her grandmother was born of a slave and a slave owner. Pauli attended law school at Howard University. She was the only woman, and first in her graduating class. Her final law school paper argued that segregation violated the 13th and 14th Amendments to the U. S. Constitution. Her reasoning was used by Thurgood Marshall in successfully arguing Brown vs. Board of Education. Later, Pauli became the first African-American woman to be ordained an Episcopal priest. Her ancestors were slaves. Our story is pain and possibility.

Today, our Gospel lesson is the parable of the talents. Now, a talent is a large sum of money, equivalent to the wages of a day laborer for fifteen years. Both the slave given five talents and the slave given two talents are able to double their money and are rewarded by the master on his return. However, the slave given one talent is cautious. He is worried that, even with the best of intentions, he might lose some of the master’s investment. So, he saves the one talent and returns it in whole to his master. You might want to praise this slave for being cautious with someone else’s money. That’s not how the master sees it. He scorns him andpunishes him. Much as we might want some Scriptural inspiration for our investment risk tolerance, Matthew is not offering up Jesus’ parable as investment advice. Rather, Matthew is offering an allegory for how we live life. This passage was written in the context of the parousia – Jesus’ followers expected that the second coming of Christ and the final judgment of mankind was imminent. Matthew’s listeners are being inspired not to live passively waiting for the end, but to live actively, to love God by living fully: creating, serving, seeking the possibilities in life.

Perhaps, our Old Testament lesson is a good starting point, reminding us of how it was, reminding us of the debilitating cycle that entrapped the Israelites. So, a quick review… Moses
leads the Israelites out of Egypt across the Red Sea toward the Promised Land. They wander in the wilderness for forty years. But, Moses angers God and so God does not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. When Moses dies, Joshua is put in charge and leads the people, one battle after another, into the land of Canaan. However, Joshua dies before the land has been fully conquered. Now there is a new generation of Israelites who do not know the Lord. So, they sin, and then they are punished, and then they are delivered by the first judge. Then, they sin, and are punished, and are delivered by the second judge. This cycle continues over 300 years - there are twelve judges – with each cycle, the Israelites sink into deeper depravity. Deborah, who we heard about this morning, is the 4th judge. The Israelites sinned, they were given over to the King of Canaan and oppressed for twenty years. They approach Deborah who tells them how to position themselves to defeat the King’s army. God leads them in their attack and the Canaanites are defeated. The Israelites live in peace for forty years, but once again fall into the cycle of sin, punishment, and deliverance.

It’s not just an old tale. You don’t have to read too far into the morning newspaper, or listen too long into the evening news hour, to know that we get trapped in debilitating, debasing patterns of behavior. Jesus is shouting out, “Don’t settle.” Jesus’s life, death and resurrection heralds the ever-present opportunity for new life: life-giving relationships, life-giving compassion, life-giving respect. Our story is pain and possibility.

Rhoda was a long-time member of my previous parish. She was very active, singing in the choir, serving on the Altar Guild and the Churchyard Committee, playing in the Bell Choir. In addition, she devoted many hours to local charities, including an Episcopal charity which educates and provides a home for at-risk youth. Though in many ways a role model, Rhoda was an unpleasant person. It was not easy being her friend, or her neighbor, or her fellow parishioner. Yet, in the last years of her life, she broke through the bitterness. She became a gracious woman with a beautiful smile. It takes courage to turn from being a bitter person to being a gracious person. But, Rhoda did. We can change. Jesus assures us that fundamental to our God-given life is the ever-present possibility for new life: to resist evil, to ask forgiveness, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to strive for justice and righteousness, to respect the dignity of every human being. We can change. If we can change, why not our community? Why not our nation? Why not our world? We can resolve issues of education and housing in Cleveland. We can heal the divisiveness in this country. We can eradicate issues of hunger around the world. We can effect
Today, on this Commitment Sunday, we say, “Yes, our life begins in God.” We say, “Yes, we are saved by God.” We say, “Yes, we thrive through God.” And so, we celebrate giving back a fitting portion of what God has given us so we can sustain and nurture the ministries of our parish which draw us closer to God and into the ongoing care for one another and all of God’s Creation. Thank you for loving and nurturing St. Paul’s into a life-giving community. James Finley, who spoke here last year, says, “If we are absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God that protects us from nothing even as it sustains us in all things, we can face all things in courage and tenderness and touch the hurting places in others and in ourselves with love.” As sure as there is pain in this world, there is possibility of new life within St. Paul’s and beyond. Amen.