

## Sermon

November 15, 2020

Matthew 25: 14-30

This parable has often been understood as a stewardship parable. Traditional interpretations make the master Jesus or God, the slaves, ourselves and the talents....well, our talents and in the sense of stewardship in our church community, our financial resources. And we'd better use our talents and our resources wisely. The more wisely we invest our time and talent the more will be given. It seems to make sense and be valid, but what about the second half of the story? It seems often too fearful and confusing to even address. If we are deemed unwise or irresponsible, and hold on to the little we have, or do with it what we think best, it too will be taken away and we will be thrown into "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." That's horrifying and so contrary to the God that we see in Jesus. We simply cannot reconcile this parable with the Jesus we have come to know that is caring for the poor, healing the sick, eating with women and the marginalized and, touching the "unclean", showing acceptance to foreigners, who is so full of compassion, love, justice and forgiveness. Where did he go? How do we hold on to this text as scripture, as the Word of God as told to us through Jesus in the words of Matthew the writer? What are we to hear? Where is the 'good news'?

Let's go back into the parable and look again. Always a challenge, is understanding the context of the time and place. We are not Jews of the first century living with Roman occupation. Just to start, our world view, religion, culture and language are different. But sometimes just knowing a few things can help shift our understanding, open possibilities of seeing and understanding the parable in a new and different light. Here are insights to a few words and concepts. The Greek word used for master is *kyrios*, and it is used both as small "l" lord as in the landowner and "L" as in addressing Lord Jesus or God. Our traditional assumption in this parable is that it refers to Jesus, our "L" Lord. According to commentators the small "l" lord or *kyrios* is more consistent within this section of Matthew's gospel. Therefore the man who is the master is understood to actually be a landowner in the story rather than a divine figure of Jesus

or God. A talent or *talentum* in Latin, was a denomination of currency, one talent in the currency of the day equaled about 6000 denarii – about 20 years of average wages. In the first century is not a skill or ability as we think of talent, even though the English language ended up with that word in the Middle Ages meaning abilities or natural artistic, athletic endowments for example. The Merriam-Webster dictionary notes that a talentum refers to “any of several ancient units of weight” or “a unit of value equal to the value of a talent of gold or silver”. So imagine two to five times that amount. It is absurd, wealth beyond imagination. No wonder the slave given “only” one talent buried it, which according to the practice of the day, was a perfectly acceptable way of keeping your money. It is also interesting to note that he put the money in the ground, which is ultimately owned by God (Leviticus 25:23-28). Is Jesus saying that he gave the money back to God, the ultimate owner? (Stan Duncan) In addition, the slave who buried the talent is told by the master, one of the 1% of the wealthy, that he should have at least invested it to make interest which according to scripture is a forbidden practice (Exodus 20:20-30). The third slave also calls out the master and accuses him of being a “skleros,” someone who is violent, rough, offensive, and thoroughly intolerable. He accuses him of not actually doing anything to get his wealth; he doesn’t plant, he doesn’t distribute his wealth. He just collects interest on it from the misery of people who were sucked into the downwardly spiraling system.” (Stan Duncan) Finally, it is also significant to understand that the slaves who were engaged to manage the estate were *doulous*, actually more akin to estate managers that had responsibility for the estate in the master’s absence rather than simply labourers.

For the moment try to think about this passage again without the assumptions you have had in the past. It is hard. There’s a lot not to like, I really don’t like any of the characters in the story, except the startlingly bold third slave. The master is conniving, he reaped where he did not sow and gathered where he did not scatter seed, and he was mean. He was one of the few controlling superwealthy, his wealth was on the backs of the poor farmers who would lose their land. The first two slaves are entrusted with portions of the estate, huge sums of money, five and two talents, many lifetimes of income. And while called upon to take care of things, were left unsupported abandoned by the master. The money wasn’t theirs and they wouldn’t make any money for themselves. Those two slaves would increase their master’s funds through

trading in the temple. Remember that Jesus overturns the tables of the money lenders? What exactly would these two gain by making great sums of money for their master, not money for themselves but power and prestige. They are told “you will have more responsibility and may enter into the joy of the master.” What was the “joy” of that master power, prestige, control over the vulnerable? In this context, from this perspective the third slave or *doulos* is not the bad slave who hoards his skill, abilities and resources and turns away from God, or doesn’t follow Jesus. The third slave takes his master’s money goes and buries it. Remember, “He accused the wealthy one percenter of being a “sklernos,” someone who is violent, rough, offensive, and thoroughly intolerable. He accuses him of not actually doing anything to get his wealth: he doesn’t plant, he doesn’t distribute his wealth.” This slave refuses to participate in a corrupt system; money should not be used as a weapon against homes and farms and families.” (Stan Duncan) The horrific consequence of his actions, or inaction, his refusal to participate in a corrupt system is death.

Even through our traditional interpretive lens of stewardship or end times this passage in Matthew is difficult to hear, to make sense of. We can’t help it that our angst goes up a few notches. So what does Jesus want us to know in Matthew’s recalling of the Parable of the Talents? I would like to suggest that we need to relearn the lessons of this parable. This sermon does not need to be a stewardship sermon or one on the responsible use of our skills and abilities, also known as talents as giving back to God. It is not about being good or bad. It is not about ‘end times’, the *parousia* in Greek, that is the theme of books and Hollywood movies that strike fear into tender hearts and maybe those not so tender.

I want to suggest with other scholars this is a description of our world and is the darkness before the light. Maybe today is not so different after all to Jesus’ day; there is political and religious corruption, there’s greed, manipulation and corrosive power that oppresses and denies everyday people, but especially the poor. The rich get richer on the backs of the poor. What Jesus may be saying to his disciples and listeners here is; “there will be a cost to following me, to do what I’ve taught you, to care for the poor, heal the sick, eat with the poor and marginalized, touch the “unclean”, show acceptance and kindness to foreigner, to be

compassionate, loving and forgiving to some of you will be persecuted, suffer and lose your lives.” And God will be with you, God does not abandon God’s people.

Did I get the tail on the sermon donkey? I don’t know, but I do feel less anxious about this parable. I feel that somehow Jesus listeners are not so different from me, from us. We live in hard times and sometimes choosing to do the right thing is hard and there are uncomfortable, life threatening or life taking consequences. In the words of Stan Duncan; “Perhaps, instead, this is not an allegory. Perhaps Jesus was simply saying that if you stand up and denounce an immoral, evil, system, you may have to pay for it. Think Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Malala Yousafzai, and so so many more. Perhaps Jesus was saying that sometimes—like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace (Daniel1-3) the right thing to do is to offer up your life as a bulwark against injustice, even if it means losing that life.

Perhaps the message of the story is simply that the story is true, then and now, and that if you don’t like it, what are you going to do about it?”

Amen