



Sermon & Scripture

Nov 15, 2020

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Matthew 25:14-30

14 “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; **15** to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. **16** The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. **17** In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. **18** But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. **19** After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. **20** Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ **21** His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ **22** And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ **23** His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ **24** Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; **25** so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ **26** But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? **27** Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. **28** So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. **29** For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. **30** As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Generous and Gracious God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

At my middle school, there was an annual trip for 6th graders to go to a camp for a weekend in the fall. It reminded me of girl scout camp, but the only purpose was to get to know each other and have fun. One of the highlights of the camp was that it had a zip

line and we all got a turn to go. This was a simple zip line, just a tower with a stairwell that led up to the top, and the line flew us over an empty field. They gave us the safety talk and we all lined up, up and up the stairwell to the top of the tower where they would clip our waist harness to the line and then we would step off the edge of the tower and FLY! It was easy as that. Buuut, I am afraid of heights. I watched each of my classmates who were in front of me in line go for it, and scream and cheer as they went. But the longer I waited the more that I couldn't imagine myself taking that step off the platform just into the air and the more I started thinking the fly through the air would only be terrifying and not fun at all.. As the line dwindled in front of me, my apprehension and fear rose and rose. I had made it that far and didn't want to look like a scaredy cat in front of a whole bunch of my class, so instead of quitting, I let person after person go in front of me in line. Close enough to the top to look out over the drop and feed the fear, I hesitated time and time again, letting everyone go in front of me until I was the last one left in the tower. I couldn't put it off anymore. The only way down with dignity was to get clipped in and step off the edge. So I took a deep breath and told them to hook me in, I took another deep breath, and I took the step. To be honest, I don't remember those moments when I finally took the step, but I do remember the feeling soon after of how wonderful and fun it felt to soar through the air.

I started that journey by letting my fear control me, and only getting to watch as classmate after classmate got to experience the joy of taking the risk. As I stood on the top platform and chose not to do it, I took away the potential for fun and joy that was possible by going for it. But once I made the choice to go for it, I had a lot of fun! I ended up being a bit like all of the servants in the parable that day. I started like the third servant, paralyzed by fear and holding myself back from the fun because I was afraid of what could go wrong. But unlike that third servant, I didn't stay in that fear, instead I finally made the choice to see the zip line as an opportunity for fun instead of fear and took the risk, and because I did that, I got to share in the exhilarating joy with my classmates.

There is a bit more to this parable than some middle schoolers at 6th grade camp though. This is another parable that has probably made a lot of you think that it just doesn't make sense. It doesn't add up with how you know God to be and the rest of Jesus's teachings of justice, grace and mercy. Me too! I know I've heard of this parable being used as a way to biblically defend greed and ambitions of wealth, even as far to say that if we serve God, then God will bring us wealth. It's another head turning parable that requires a little bit of digging to find an interpretation that makes sense as part of Jesus's teachings and leaves us with true Good News.

First, some basic information to help us understand what is going on with this story. This parable is best read as a parable, meaning a story to tell us a lesson. Not an allegory, meaning we should not read this one like every character and action has a parallel in the real world. In the gospel of Matthew, this lesson is being told as part of a series of lessons that Jesus gave his disciples in the final days before he would be killed. These lessons are some of Jesus's last lessons for his followers to prepare them for when they will be on their own without Jesus. So, we ought to interpret this parable with that in mind.

Now to some of the details, the translation of the story that I read this morning says the master gave the three servants various amounts of talents, not all translations

are as specific as this one. This detail is important because it tells us how grand the generosity of the master was. A talent was worth 10 or 20 years worth of common wages. So, the one who was given 5 and traded to make 5 more, ended up with 100 to 200 years of wages. The one who was given 2 and made 2 more ended up with 40-80 years of wages. Even the one who was given 1 was entrusted with a whole lot of money. A master entrusting servants with this amount of money is so grand, it's hyperbolic. It is a gift beyond understanding. It is to make us think of the greatest gift that we have been given, that of being a part of the Kingdom of Heaven.

So then what is this whole thing about the third servant burying the money to keep it safe and the Master's response to him having done that. In parables like this, the master almost always represents God. The master being described as "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed" does not sound like God! Violent, punitive, and cheating. This is not the God that I know. It's this description of the master that usually starts my confusion about this parable. Which is then doubled as the Master's reacts. The servant perhaps didn't do his best, but he also didn't LOSE money, which surely would have been worse! This seems to be a large reaction over just not making money. This got biblical scholars thinking. Perhaps it is less about the money itself and more about the mindset of the third servant that led to the way he handled the money. There are two main ways that his mindset set him up for failure. His perception of the master and that he acted out of fear.

It is the servant who characterizes the master as harsh and unjust. Before this description, there is nothing said in the narration of the story that indicates that the master is the things the servant accuses him of being. The master entrusts three servants with large amounts of money and then gives them the money originally entrusted plus their earnings. The master also does not confirm the accusations in his response, but just repeats them, asking "you knew that I am these bad things?" As if saying, "Oh, you know this about me, huh? If you know so much, you could have been at least smart enough to put the money in the bank to get interest." Add to that lack of evidence of the master's character that we are supposed to think of the master as God, this negative characterization of the master, just does not make sense. This means that this description of the master by the third servant could very well be a mischaracterization, and a slanderous one at that.

Add on top of that mischaracterization, the third servant says that because of his negative characterization of his master, he was afraid and that is why he buried the money and did not attempt to multiply it. He acted based on a false idea of who the master was and it kept him from taking the risk to multiply the money. It was because of these two pieces of the servant's mindset that brought about the reaction of the master. The master is not revoking the money over a simple business decision, but instead over being slandered, not trusted, and feared.

So, that explains a majority of the parable, but one last confusing part remains. The master, who represents God, still claims, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." With those words, maybe the third servant was right and the master is harsh! The words sound harsh when we stick to the idea of money and prosperity, but when we zoom out and think about what Jesus was trying to say with this parable, what it is that some have and others do not being referred to here is actually

being a part of the Kingdom of God. So, to make better sense of it, it is really saying, "For all those who are working as part of the Kingdom of God, they will become more a part of the Kingdom, sharing in the Kingdom in abundance. But those who are not working as part of the Kingdom, those that have no part in it or are only keeping it to themselves and doing nothing to grow it for themselves or with others, will lose their connection to the Kingdom of God.

So what is the lesson of this parable then? If not, get rich and get richer or get poor and get poorer? // As it was given to the people who would soon lose Jesus and would have to do the Kingdom work on their own, this lesson is another of warning. As they head into the work of the Kingdom on their own, they are to remember not to mischaracterize God and not give into fear of God or fear of failing, instead taking the risk to live out Jesus's teachings and grow the Kingdom of God. This is a lesson that is timeless. We live in a time when so many people claim to know the truth about God. There are so many opinions about what we should believe and how we should live that out. This parable reminds us that if a characterization of God leads us to live or act from a place of fear, then that is a mischaracterization of God.

This all reminds me of one of the 10 commandments, the third, "You shall not take the Lord's name in vain." In this day in age, a lot of people think that this commandment is a rule against saying things like "Oh my God!" But, it is actually a lot deeper than that. Not taking the Lord's name in vain is not against superficial sayings like that, but in labelling something as the work of God when it wasn't or so that we are benefitted. Like when someone says something is God's Will but it is really the thing that they wanted to happen. For example, I've been watching a BBC series about 15th Century royal drama around the wars between houses of who will be King. There is one family with a super religious mother who claims it is God's will to have her son on the throne, when it is clear that this claim really stems from the fact that she always wished she had been chosen to marry the Prince and got to be Queen. A bit more modern example, I think of the Westboro Baptist church, that church who is famous for protesting outside military funerals and the like with the signs that say things like "God hates Fags" and that natural disasters are God's punishments for the American laws allowing gay marriage. In both of the examples, the people are making claims based on their own wishes and bigotry and applying it to God, thus mischaracterizing God. This mischaracterization of God leads to groups like Westboro Baptist or other fire and brimstone believers to have their faith come from fear of punishment, and they end up turning as many if not more people away from Christian faith than they draw in. This lesson is not just applicable to others though, it is a lesson for all of us who are followers of Jesus. When each of us live into our faith, and trust and believe in the true characterization of God, as God of love and grace, then we can live out of an attitude of abundance and abandon instead of fear. This does not mean that we can never feel fear, or be afraid about anything, but our faith and the way we live it out should not stem from any bit of fear, but from love and trust in our God. It is about our motivations behind our actions, not never feeling fear. This year, people have been talking about what it means to live into fear a bit more than usual. You all have probably all heard from someone else, or thought it yourself, that taking the precautions against COVID like locking down and wearing masks is living into fear. Perhaps it could be, but I can say as someone who is a part of the conversations around what we should do as a church,

those conversations are rarely motivated from a place of fear but instead love for our church family and neighbors. We have taken the precautions of being virtual or distanced inside and wearing masks to best care for the rest of our church family. That comes from a place of love, not fear. It comes from a place willing to take risks in not worshipping like we are used to and trusting that our community connections and financial stability will remain, not fear. It doesn't mean that none of us are afraid of COVID in some way, I am sure plenty of us are, and that's okay, but ultimately we make the choices we do because we are motivated by love and care for our neighbor and a willingness to do things differently to keep the Kingdom of God active amongst us.

This parable teaches us this lesson to live into abundance instead of fear, but also reminds us of why we should live out our faith with abundance and trust. Because we have a God who makes it possible. The master entrusting the servants the huge amounts of money in the beginning and then giving them their earnings on top of it at the end remind us of God's generosity and trust in us as God's followers. God entrusts us with God's Kingdom, so that we can share God's love and abundance to grow the Kingdom. Each of us are called to live out and build God's Kingdom as we were beautifully created to, building it using our gifts and skills given to us by God. Just as the Master gave each servant an amount of money according to his abilities, God calls us to live into and share a piece of God's Kingdom according to our abilities.

Now, God entrusting us with the Kingdom is no small thing and is not meant to be a gift of ease. It is easy to think about the work and become afraid of messing it up like the third servant and just keep it to yourself. Doing Kingdom work in the world, truly living out the gospel, living into generosity and love and justice to their fullest, is RISKY work! Jesus is well aware of this risk, he is about to die on a cross for embodying that work. This parable is a reminder to all followers of Jesus, from those who would see the reality of that risk first hand in a couple of days from when it was first told as Jesus hanged on that cross, to those of us today who live in a country that is majority Christian identifying. It reminds us, that to be followers of Jesus and be a part of growing the Kingdom of God on heaven and earth, we must trust in our God as a God of love and grace as Jesus taught us and let that feed our faith as we live it out abundantly, willing to take risks and put ourselves out there for the sake of the gospel. God calls us to an active faith, living it out in the world and with others. When we live out our faith in bold ways, we bring the Kingdom of God here on earth little by little. May we be a part of that.

Let us pray:

Lord of mercy and justice, you have given us so many talents and gifts to be used in your world. Gifts of teaching, healing, inspiring, challenging and creating are all among the myriad of things you have placed in our lives. You have given us these gifts because you trust us to use them well — and you will be with us in all our work. But we disappoint you when we denigrate the value of the talents or become so fearful of failure that we don't believe that we are capable of helping in this world. Lord, forgive us. Help us to trust in the gifts you have given to us and to trust in your guidance in using them. Direct our lives to use these gifts as we reach out to our neighborhood and nation, witnessing to your love and your healing mercy. Forgive us when we are fearful, stubborn, apathetic, indifferent to the needs around us. Give us hearts for serving you all our days. In Jesus' name we pray. AMEN.