

Sermon: November 19, 2023 – Matthew 25: 14-30

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore/Banff AB – Rev Greg Wooley

When Shannon and I were in seminary a key piece of advice given to student preachers was, “don’t preach two sermons.” This morning I am heeding that wise advice; I will not preach two sermons; I will preach three! For the parable of the talents – in a way the easiest scripture to preach in the entire Bible – has depth and breadth to it that informs that preaching path.

Preaching pathway number one, is the time-tested and true stewardship message. Whatever else I say this morning, this stewardship preaching path is still true, and needs to be heard. At a time when many charities and Churches have dangerously low capacity, your participation is very much needed for us to keep on addressing our call and purpose in the community.

From this angle of interpretation, we revisit the details of the gospel. Three servants are entrusted with large sums of money, according to their ability, when their master goes on a trip. Even the one given the smallest amount of money, one talent, is given the amount of money that a worker would typically make in twenty years (6,000 Denarii – see Hare p.286), and the two other servants are given twice that much and five times that much. When the master returns, in the words of the NRSV, “the one who had received the five talents went off 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.” The master, delighted at the return on his investment by the first two, promises they will be given even more responsibility, but to the one who buried the one talent, dug it up and gave it back, these words are spoken: “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.”

Those who put time and effort into the venture on the Master’s behalf are given even greater responsibility; the one who does not engage, exits with nothing. I have found this to be true in a couple of ways over the years.

First, it’s really important when making financial requests, that a Church not use a “one size fits all” approach. Some people have way more discretionary money available than others and, yes, some people have a much higher capacity of energy, creativity and time than others. So the way this works best in community, is if everyone sizes up what resources they have available, what the needs are and the relative ability of the whole group to meet those needs, and give accordingly, recognizing, alas, that nothing gets cheaper with the passage of time. And please note, that both the one who took 2 and made it into 4, and the one who took 5 and made it into 10, were full participants in the joyous celebration. Both did the best they could with what they had and it was “enough.”

The second way this is true is something I have seen in workplaces and volunteer organizations: the more you put in, the more you tend to get out. The activities our kids were involved in where I just dropped them off at the beginning and picked them up in the end, well, that was just a task, even an interruption for me. But the ones where I jumped in – like baseball – I went from helping with practices to umpiring to coaching to managing. As I gave more of myself, I was presented with opportunities to give even more. Yes, it took time and energy and I still recall panicked coaching decisions that instantly went sour, but I enjoyed doing it at the time and that joy has stuck with me. My investment of self filled a need, it strengthened my connection with something my son loved to do, and I got a lot back from it. So there’s approach number one. But if we go back and look at this scripture again, in its setting, it takes a whole new shape.

This reading takes place in the pressure cooker that was Jerusalem, in the last week of Jesus' life. So Jesus shared this parable not whilst enjoying the rushing waters of Caesarea Philippi or taking a bit of a break at Bethany or Capernaum. These words were spoken after Palm Sunday, after he had caused a disruption at the Temple, after the authorities had started to close in. So these are not casual, "anyday" words – these words describe the ways of the new realm to come, the Kingdom or "Kin-Dom" of God. And in case the reader/listener missed this, the 25th chapter of Matthew begins, "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this" and it applies to all sections of the chapter, including the parable of the wise and foolish maidens, this parable, and the parable of the sheep and goats which follows. These words, then, are framed within a final reckoning, when Christ returns and the fullness of God's new realm comes with him.

Viewing this parable in this urgent, Kingdom-oriented framework, commentator Robert Mounce writes (p.242): "The servants of Christ, as they await his [second coming] have been entrusted with the responsibility of utilizing the gifts they have been given by the Master. To fail in this critical obligation is to be excluded from the Kingdom when Christ returns." Commentator Douglas Hare further notes (p.287) that while the first two servants understood their master's will, and put in vigorous efforts consistent with it, the one who simply buried the treasure blames the Master and says it wasn't his fault, because "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter." In other words, for the third servant it was a relationship based not in love, but fear.

As much as we hear about the Kingdom of God as a realm in which the social structure is inverted, at its heart it is a realm in which deep, active love flourishes. The first two servants understood this, while the third one completely misunderstands the heart of God and, in essence, excludes himself from participating in the joyous Kin-dom. Yes, Matthew adds some gratuitous violence at the end, "throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" but that kind of extreme language simply underlines Matthew's assertion that preparing for the Kin-dom of God is a matter of life and death, not just peripheral.

Two down, one to go. Every so often I read or hear something in preparing the sermon that stops me in my tracks, and this week that was provided by Rebecca Davis, a self-described "trauma-informed writer, book coach, speaker, compassionate witness, prayer minister, and lover of Jesus".

While I admittedly didn't follow all parts of her argument, what came through crystal clear was this: we need to be aware of how this parable could sound to someone who has endured trauma. So – with apologies to those who are in such a space - imagine with me how these words would sound if you were at a point in your life where you are basically frozen in place, your heart and mind and body unable to respond in any meaningful way to the call of Christ. It could have originated in trauma or abuse, it could be anxiety or dysthymia or depression, it could be life circumstances that leave you with little time, energy or money to give... but whatever the source, from that standpoint, these words of parable just pile on: two people with time, energy and money do just fine and delight their master while you, frozen with fear, just try to not screw up, and as a bonus you get pummelled for doing so.

So from this vantage point, where do we go with this parable? I think we take one large step to the side, and name a lie that Jesus purposely included and the way that believing that lie can ruin things. The lie is that the Master – i.e. God or Christ – was "a harsh [master], reaping where [they] did not sow and gathering where [they] did not scatter." If we view God as harsh, judgmental, unjust, distant, punitive, then our spiritual life will be ruled by fear, shame, unworthiness. To make it worse, if someone – a parent, a minister, an authority figure, anyone – has treated us that way in life and undermined our self-worth, then the fear of being diminished even further is going to be pervasive and immobilizing. THE GOOD NEWS in the midst of this, is

that this picture of God IS A LIE and the actions fuelled when this false picture of God is in place, are actions and attitudes that will surely be misshapen – in the image and likeness of fear.

Friends: God is good, God is generous, God is gracious, God is love, and those who live in God live in love – and God’s grace, and generosity, and a goodness that just flows. Like a skilled and loving parent, who helps a child to grow in skill and confidence and capacity, God is particularly delighted when we stretch ourselves and achieve things that we thought impossible, but it starts with a deep belovedness in who we are apart from those accomplishments.

In the parable, the one given five and the one given two were given what the Master figured they could handle and both of them did well with the resources at hand. The one given one talent – remember, this was still a huge amount – was so dominated by the lie that the Master was unjust, unfair and uncaring that no good could be done with the resources. If we assume that the master in the parable is God/Christ – and there are interpretations that say it wasn’t - it wasn’t the lack of initiative, skill or drive on the part of that third servant that was the problem; it was the belief that (a) God is basically angry and unjust and disappointed in me, and (b) God hasn’t given me or us the gifts needed to succeed in this new Kin-dom of God, so there was no sense even trying.

My take on the actions and interactions of this third servant is that it shows how a MISUNDERSTANDING OF WHO GOD IS can warp our lives, as individuals, as families, as Churches. If I picture God as anything other than loving, if I assume that nothing I do will ever be good enough for God, then I have been totally misled, and so much good is going to be left undone. In response to that misshaped image of God and God’s expectations of me, the God of my understanding holds me and tries to mend the brokenness. That which gets cast out into the darkness isn’t that third servant, but the destructive God-concept they were carrying. (The Master’s angry assertion to the third servant, “you should have invested this” is a bit of a tip-off that something is awry here; within the Jewish world of Jesus, God would NEVER give such advice!)

As with the first disciples, we live in fearful times; there’s lots to be alarmed about. And in such fearful times, we need to encourage those who are shut down by fear and lift up the dignity of those who have been hurt, and expel any notion of God that is not founded on transformative, justice-bearing love. Viewing this parable from the perspective of the traumatized not only calls us to be more aware of and responsive to the devastating power of trauma on the body, mind and spirit of those who carry it, but to embrace a self-image that says, “the image and likeness of God lives in all of us, and we pray for the strength to express this in as bold and rich a love as we can muster.”

And so, we take with us today the gifts of the parable of the talents, and a sampling of three of many ways to approach these words: yes, it does encourage us to be all-in stewards of what God has given. Yes, it does reframe our actions, to understand our lives, our words and actions as individuals and as a Church as expressions of the Kin-dom of God. And in a world where fear and trauma hold so much sway, this parable can potentially call us away from lies we might believe about a punitive God, to gently grow us into images of God that are empowering, uplifting, and infused with love. Thanks be to God, and to Christ Jesus in whom such wisdom comes to us. Amen.

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