

Parable about Talents???

Matthew 25:14-30

November 19, 2023

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

On the surface today's lesson, prescribed by the lectionary (that three year prescribed system of reading the scriptures as part of worship), has the makings of a decent stewardship sermon. A sermon that speaks to how we should use our resources. On the surface the message of this parable seems simple enough.

You have a man who's going to go on a trip, and he gives three servants various amounts of money - talents - a talent is a weight of silver -and then when he comes back he wants to see what they've done with that money. The first two servants did good the third servant, who buried his one talent, gets thrown out into the outer darkness. //Christians over the centuries have interpreted this parable in a variety of different ways.

For instance, I read of a church where they used this parable as the foundation for a fund-raising drive. The pastor gave a sermon on this parable and then at the end he gave everybody in the congregation, some cash. Then he said to them: "OK now you take this cash, and you make more cash with it, and then come back here in two months and we will put all that money toward the work of the Church". So, people went and they used the cash to buy lemonade mix and plastic cups and they set up a lemonade stand and they multiplied their money. Some other people took the money, went to a craft store, and bought some beads and cords and some fabric and glue and glitter and they made things. And then they sold those things at a flea market, and they multiplied the money. A couple months later everybody in the congregation brought their money back, plus all the money that they had made, and they had increased it, multiplied it several times over. It was a wonderful fundraiser for the church. ///

The problem is that I don't think this is what this parable is about. I'm not against fundraisers for the church but is this parable about fundraising – is this parable about the benefits of capitalism? ///Does the third servant get thrown out into the outer darkness because he won't participate in capitalism. I don't think that's what this parable is about.

This parable of the talents is puzzling.

I read of another church, which used this parable as a basis for recruiting volunteers. So, again the minister preached a sermon on this parable and then ended by saying; "OK, now we need you to use your talents for the church". "We need to fill various volunteer positions. We need people to serve on committees. We need people to teach Sunday school and serve at funeral lunches. We need folks to visit shut ins. We need people to be doing a variety of things. So, use the talent that God has given you! Use that talent for the betterment of the church." ///

But is this what this parable is about? I'm all for the church filling its volunteer positions, and helping people identify their gifts and then using those gifts. But I'm not so sure that this parable is actually about getting people to do things.

So what is this parable about? To be honest with you I'm not really quite sure but I have some ideas.

Maybe this parable is a warning to Jesus followers not to become lazy in their discipleship. It could be that Jesus, in effect was saying to his disciples; "you know I'm going to be going on a long trip just like the master in this story and I'm going to be gone and it'll be a while before you see me again and, in the meantime, what are you going to do? Will you be taking the good news - the talents that I've given you, the Good News and will you be using that to invite more disciples and to teach those disciples to do everything that I've taught you?

Now that could be what this parable is about and it could be that the third servant is someone who takes the good news and buries it and does nothing with it and if you're going to do that - well you have missed the point of Jesus the servant master.

Or maybe this parable is meant to be a criticism of an economic system in which the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. *Have you ever been bothered about what happens to that third servant* who buried his one talent in the ground. Have you ever felt like he was treated unfairly? Have you ever identified with him and said; "you know I think I would have done the same thing." I know I have felt that way. I have always felt that way about this third servant. I mean, if some rich guy gave me a pile of money and then said; "I'm going to go on a long trip - you take care of this money for me". I'm not going to turn around and **gamble** that money on the stock market. What if my investments don't pay off. What if at the end of this guy's trip, he comes back and of the \$10,000 he gave me I only have \$4000 to give back because my investments didn't pan out. I think I'd be in a lot of trouble it seems to me. /// It's the third servant who does the most prudent and sensible thing. He takes that money and he puts it in the ground where it's going to be safe because that's what you did in the ancient world. If you wanted your money to be safe you buried it in the ground. That's exactly what this third servant is doing. The third servant seems smart to me. *So, I'm thinking that in this parable, the third servant is actually the one who does the right thing. But he gets in trouble for doing the right thing!!*

Let's take a moment and pay attention to how the third servant describes his master, he says to him; "master I knew that you were a harsh man reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter so I was afraid. Now does that sound like a description of a good master? It sounds like somebody who's ruthless. It sounds like a rich guy, who exploits others, in order to increase his own wealth. And what I find fascinating is that the master doesn't disagree with that description. The Master says; you know you, wicked lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sew, and gather where I did not scatter - *he's agreeing with the slave*. Yeah you're right - I'm making money even though I'm not doing any work. And then the master goes on to say; "well then, you ought to have invested my money with the bankers and on my return, I would have received what was mine with interest.

Except in the book of Deuteronomy, it forbids Israelites from loaning out money at interest. Interest was considered another form of exploitation in the ancient world and so really what the third servant has done then - is he's refusing to break Moses laws. The third slave is refusing to be part of the master's program of exploiting other people in order to increase his own wealth. **So maybe this third servant is doing the right thing.** Maybe this parable is a criticism of an unjust economic system. ////

Maybe there's a third possible interpretation of this parable.

When Jesus traveled from town to town, he often told people: "come follow me" but in order to follow Jesus they had to leave everything else behind, they had to leave behind their jobs, they had to leave behind their homes - even their families. They had to leave behind their wealth to follow Jesus. Could it be that this parable is about **what it takes to follow Jesus**. What it takes to be part of bringing God's love and peace to the earth.

Could this be a parable about how we need to risk everything to follow Jesus.

You know being a Christian is not supposed to be comfortable. Following Jesus is not safe. **The Christian faith is not a moderate faith**. If we want to be part of God's unfolding in our world, then we have to be willing to put everything on the line to follow Jesus. We need to be willing to risk everything to follow Jesus. /// To love our neighbor - to take that seriously, is to risk everything. To love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us. To bless those who curse us, to pray for those who mistreat us, that is mighty hard work.

It is God's way and it is risky.

It's a risky business this way of love and justice, of peace and hope.

God's business takes a courageous faith. It takes followers who are willing to take the risk.

Maybe this is a good stewardship parable after all it's just not about money – its about our lives and our willingness to risk everything to follow the way of Jesus.

Rev. Debra Berg