

Parable of Talents
November 13, 2011

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; 15to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then 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.’ 21His 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.’ 22And 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.’ 23His 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.’ 24Then 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; 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26But 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? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29For 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. 30As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

One of the things I enjoy as a pastor is Bible study. I love delving into a passage, looking at it from all sides, wrestling with what it might mean for us today. When doing serious Bible study there is one thing I hear over and over again. It’s just a little comment – an observation, if you will – that goes something like this, “I’ve never noticed that before.”

The truth is that most of us are not accustomed to doing serious Bible study. We either have 3rd grade recollections of what we learned in Sunday school or we have gotten used to reading the Bible devotionally. What so often happens when we actually study the Bible is that we become disturbed. Things our sweet Sunday school stories glossed over glare from the page at us and we are challenged to deal with it.

Our scripture reading for today is one of those stories that too often ends with the tidy moral, “To whom much is given, much is expected.” Now don’t get me wrong – there is nothing wrong with that expression – it is just that is not what this parable of the talents is about. We have been so conditioned to think that this story is about multiplying what God gives to us that we are unable to hear anything else.

I did just that with this parable. When Jerry McNeley came to me about the stewardship idea of multiplying an investment she and I both went immediately to the parable of the talents. I said, “Oh Jerry, I’m going to preach on that parable in November we could kick it off then.”

A few weeks ago, when I started preparing for this sermon, I was disappointed to remember that this passage doesn’t say what I thought it did – and it doesn’t really help us launch the idea of sharing our talents. As tempting as it is to try to make it say what I want it to say – I can’t. So today I am going to ask you to imagine a big eraser. Now I want you to erase what you think you know about this parable and listen with fresh ears to a story fitting for our times.

First of all, this is a parable about money. A talent was a huge sum of money. The average laborer would have to work 15 years for just one talent.

The servants are employees of the master. The master has junior executives that keep the business running while he is out scouting ways to make more money and expand his influence. Let’s just say, for fun, that the master is Donald Trump and these servants are the newest contestants on his reality show “The Apprentice.” The apprentices are given operating capital and their job is to impress the Donald in hopes of receiving a nice bonus for doing so. Like most businesses there is a hierarchy so the amount of capital is based on the position or rank of the employee.

The story tells us that the first two employees made the Donald real happy. They doubled his investment. Don’t you wonder how? Wouldn’t we all like to know? In Jesus’ day wealthy people made their money a couple of different ways. The Donald’s of the day would make loans to peasant farmers so that the farmers could plant crops. Interest rates were high; estimates range to sixty percent or more (which is worse than our modern pay day loans). Now the purpose of making these loans was not so much to make a large profit but to accept land as collateral so the Donald’s could foreclose on their loans in years when the crops wouldn’t cover the debts.

Another way the employees could have made money was to manufacture luxury items for the rich. They could combine the money they got with raw goods extracted from peasants and make more money – just one problem – they had to exploit the poor to make it all work.

Things haven’t changed much over the years. A couple weeks ago our Jennie McAfee Circle hosted a special event and invited a guest speaker to speak about women’s ministries in the Christian Church Disciple of Christ. She spent the bulk of her time talking about the mission focus of Disciples Women around the country: human trafficking. She showed us a clip from a video called, “The Dark Side of Chocolate,” which showed how poor children from Mali, children as young as 8-9 years old, are trafficked across the border to the Ivory Coast and then sold as slaves to work on cocoa bean plantations. Almost all of the cocoa beans in the world are grown in the Ivory Coast. Our speaker informed us that every time we eat a piece of chocolate we participate in human trafficking.

She went on to talk about fair trade products in industries where workers are often exploited. When an item is certified Fair Trade it means that the workers who picked the raw materials were paid a living wage and not subjected to exploitation. You can easily purchase fair trade

products at certain stores and online at websites like EqualExchange.com. But be prepared for sticker shock. A can of cocoa powder you might pay \$2 for at HyVee will cost you \$5 or more. And there lies the rub. We don't want to exploit others – but we don't want to pay the money or suffer the inconvenience not to exploit.

Just as in Jesus' day – there are economic systems at play that keep the poor exploited and destitute.

So if we apply this thinking to our parable for today – the two employees that go out and double their master's money are no better than the greedy scoundrel they serve. But the third employee refuses to play the game – he buries the master's money. Some could even say he did what a faithful person should do. There were Jewish usury laws that forbade the charging of excessive interest or in some cases any interest at all. Jewish law specifically stated that burying money in the ground was an honorable way to keep it safe.

The third employee then becomes the whistleblower – he names the master for what he is – exploitive, abusive, merciless elite – a man who cares nothing about the poor on which he has built his empire. And like many whistleblowers the third employee is silenced. Donald says, "You're fired!" He is tossed out on his ear to join the ranks of the poor and suffering who weep and gnash their teeth.

So where is God in this story? Who is the hero? Not the master. The hero is the third servant who says "enough" to a system that keeps the poor suffering.

After this passage the very next passage tells us that Jesus is the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, the stranger – in other words, Jesus is in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The faithful, those who are living in the way of God's kingdom, are those who have compassion. Once again, with this parable, Jesus turned business as usual on its ear. Jesus was a whistle blower on the exploitive and abusive practices of the Roman Empire and the temple leaders. His tender-hearted mercy and willingness to stand up against injustice is what got him killed.

This parable may describe the way the world works, but it is not how God works. God is with those who sit in that darkness. It is in these dark places that we are called to shine the light of Christ, regardless of the cost.

May it be so. Amen.