

Sermon: Trusting in Our Talents

11/15/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Let's imagine for a moment that we are one of the disciples in today's Gospel lesson, sitting around Jesus as he tells the Parable of the Talents. At the time, a talent was the weight in gold or silver of 3,000 shekels. In other words, it was a considerable sum, worth somewhere between 15 and 20 years of labor. It was the kind of money that only the wealthy elite had lying around. Now, most of these wealthy first-century Jews had amassed their fortunes through trade and lending money, often at such high interest rates that the people borrowing from them lost their land and freedom as a result. These wealthy Jews were people willing to do just about anything to make a dollar, or their case denarii, and whose work often required that go out of town on business.

In the parable, Jesus tells us of one such wealthy master, who before leaving summons three of his slaves. To the first two slaves he gives five and two talents. Immediately, they go out and trade the money, how exactly we are not told, and through their trade they doubled the amount they were given. The slaves knew that the material comforts they enjoyed were dependent upon the wealth of their master, and thus that the profit they returned to him would benefit them as well. So they took a risk, and they took a risk that paid off, both for their master and for themselves; a risk that could have also led to ruin if they had returned emptyhanded. "Why should I take the same risk," we can hear the third slave think to himself as buried the single talent given to him. "After all, Jewish Law states that burying money is the best safeguard against theft and frees me from all liability if it were to be stolen. Given how harsh my master is, surely it is better to be safe than sorry."

If this was where Jesus had ended the parable, what slave do you think the disciples would have expected Jesus to call on them to imitate? I must admit, my initial inclination is towards the slave who buried the talent. Not because I believe that Jesus desires that we play it safe, but because the master that I see in the parable is nothing like the God that I know and believe in. I don't believe that God is harsh, that God enslaves and takes away our freedom, or that the key to being "good" and "trustworthy," which the master calls the first two slaves upon returning, is our willingness to play the game and make the wealthy wealthier. So often, the person described in Scripture as faithfully responding to God's call is the one who is willing to sacrifice, to stand up for truth and justice, and to challenge the ways of this world. So why, then, does Jesus go on to describe the third slave as "wicked" and "lazy," and of such little worth that he should be thrown out into the "darkness"? Most likely, because the parable was never meant to be about money and justifying our desire to make more.

While the disciples almost certainly thought of money when they heard the word "talent," I would guess that many of us thought of a something different. We probably thought of those God-given talents or abilities with which we have been blessed. We thought of our ability to sew, or shoot a basketball, or cook a meal, or play a musical instrument. Each of us truly have been given these talents by God, and it makes sense that God would not want for us to bury them. After all, what good is being blessed with the ability to sing if we do not praise God with our voices, or cook if our meals do not nourish people's bodies and souls? When we bury our talents, we prevent God from working in and through them. Such an explanation helps make sense of why the master considered the third slave to be worthless; because the slave had not used his talent(s) to bring forth anything of worth. And yet, this understanding of the word "talent," the one that we probably jumped to, did not enter common usage until the sixteenth century, more

than fifteen-hundred years after Jesus told the parable, which makes me wonder if this explanation of the parable might be missing.

Today's Gospel lesson is the second of three parables that make up Matthew 25. Last week, as you might remember, we heard the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, in which five "wise" bridesmaids are allowed to accompany the bridegroom into the wedding feast, while five "foolish" bridesmaids are rejected and sent away. Next week, we will hear the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which looks forward to the day when the Son of Man will come and judge us based on whether we have done things like feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and welcome the stranger. In each of these parables, we hear how we must be prepared for the second coming of Jesus. What if the reason why Jesus spoke today's parable when he did is because it too has something to do with the second coming? What if he was seeking to teach us how to live until that day comes? What if this is what we were missing just a few moments ago?

If this is the case, and I believe that it is, then it's hard to see how the parable could be about money or our God-given talents. In that moment, Jesus was seeking to prepare the disciples for his absence, for that time between his death and when he will come again in final victory. It's hard, at the very least, for me to imagine Jesus decided that the one thing the disciples would need as they awaited his return is a few million dollars or the ability to shoot a basketball. No, what we hear throughout the Gospel of Matthew and Paul's epistles, like in our New Testament reading for today, is of a different set of gifts. We hear how God has given us gifts like faith and love, wisdom and knowledge, and the ability to do miracles and prophecy. We hear how we have been given the gifts of the Lord's Supper, baptism, Scripture, and prayer to help sustain us as individuals and as the church. We hear how we have been given the gift of reconciliation, with God and with one another. We hear, ultimately, that the gift we have been

given, the talent that we have been by God to help us as we await Jesus' second coming, is the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has given each one of us unique gifts, and we have all been called to put our gifts to use. Not by investing them in the stock market or by practicing our jump shot to the point of perfection, but by imitating Jesus; by seeking to live as he did, each and every day of our lives. One day, Jesus will return, just like the master did, and on that day we will be asked what we did with the gifts we have been given. For some of us, like the slaves given five and two talents, we will hear Christ look upon us and declare: "Well done, good and trustworthy [disciple]...enter into the joy of your master." Meanwhile, those of us who decide to bury them will receive a far different response.

Perhaps now, the command to throw the slave out "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth," begins to make a little more sense. "After all that I have done for you and shown you," we can hear Jesus telling the disciples, as well as us gathered here today, "what could have ever led you to bury your gifts? Now, I understand that not all of us are comfortable taking the same risks as our brothers and sisters in Christ, but you chose to not even invest them at the bank. You refused to even do the bare minimum with them, even when you had nothing to lose. And now you dare to blame me? You have seen the seed that I have sown. You have seen me spread God's love through my life and ministry, and you dare to accuse me of being a "harsh" master? You dare to accuse me of being responsible for your unfaithfulness? Truly, you are wicked and lazy, and deserve to be thrown out."

A few years ago, while seeking to understand how God can harden a person's heart, like we read God did to Pharaoh in the Book of Exodus, or condemn a person to hell, I heard a turn of phrase that has always stayed with me. When the day comes that we will be judged, so the

saying goes, we will be faced with an option. Will we say “thy will be done” to God? Will we once and for all repent of our sins and seek to live in loving relationship with God and one another? Will we, no longer subject to sin and death, become the people whom God has always called us to be? Will we say “thy will be done” to God or will God say “thy will be done” to us? Will we determine that we don’t want to be in relationship with God? Will we decide that we would rather spend an eternity in hell than take the steps necessary to spend the rest of our days in heaven? God loves each one of us so much that God has given us the freedom to choose, both for and against God. The question that awaits us is whether we will choose to do God’s will or whether we will choose to do our own.

The reason why this turn of phrase has always stuck with me is because it doesn’t force us to choose between a God who is harsh, vindictive, and condemns people to eternal damnation, and a God who is generous, loving, and blesses others with eternal life. It affirms my understanding that God desires to be in loving relationship with each one of us, and that God has granted us free will because such love cannot be forced. Such love requires that we respect what others believe and do, even when we disagree with them—a sentiment sorely lacking in our current political climate—, and sometimes might even mean that we respect their decision and in the end we agree to let them go.

Like God, the master in today’s Gospel lesson was not being generous to some and harsh to others. All three of the slaves received gifts demonstrating the depths of his generosity. He gave them these gifts because he hoped that each of them would follow his example and multiply what they had been given. The first two slaves did so because they saw their master for who he is and the wisdom of his ways. The last slave refused because he decided that it was better to live a lie than face the truth and take a risk. When we neglect and bury the wonderful gifts that God has

given us, when we convince ourselves we haven't been given a gift at all, or that we should wait until a later, safer time to use them, we're lying to ourselves. We're turning God into someone who is cruel, malicious, and self-serving all because we want to justify ourselves and make ourselves feel better at the end of the day. But, as they say, the truth always catches up to you eventually.

For in the end, Jesus did not tell this parable to explain why God has given us gifts, or why our gifts are different, or how the first two slaves knew what to do, or why Jesus has gone and will come again. No, Jesus told the parable to make us ask ourselves what we are doing with the gifts we have been given. Each of us is gathered here today because we have felt the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We have felt called to do things like pray and read our Bibles, attend worship and gather together for fellowship, and receive the Lord's Supper and tell others about our faith. We've each been given gifts, different gifts, which we have been called to put to good use, so that through them God's work in the world and our lives might be multiplied. So what are we doing with the gifts we have been given? Are we choosing to do God's will or are we choosing to do our own? May God give us the courage and conviction to follow the example set forth by our Master, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, so that on the day that he returns, whenever that may be, he will look on each one of us and say, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant, come and join me in the kingdom, for now and forevermore." Amen.