

“Afraid of What?”
November 16, 2008

Matthew 25:14-30

Let’s start with a congregational survey. How many of you are familiar with this morning’s parable from the Gospel of Matthew? How many of you, whether it’s familiar or you’ve just heard it for the first time, can say you *like* it? And what do any of you think its message is?

I confess: this is one of those parables I’ve wished would fade far, far into the distance, never to be heard from or seen again. It just has too many objectionable features ... objectionable, at least, to me. For one, there’s the slavery thing. Even if we *don’t* equate the master in the parable with God, we’re still stuck with a story from Jesus that seems to accept slavery without hesitation. As a Southerner, a Christian, *a human being*, I’m deeply wary of any text, sacred or otherwise, that deals with slavery but doesn’t at the very least *grapple* with it.

Then, if we *do* equate the master in the story with God, the needle on my “objectionability meter” goes way up, with the parable seeming to suggest at least two things. First, that our relationship with God is one of slave to master and, second, that God judges us and our lives like an exploitative, harsh overseer, who rewards the savvy and punishes those who have little by taking that little away.

The objectionability meter goes up even more with that disturbing ending in which the master, who may or may not represent God, throws someone into “the outer darkness,” a mysterious place that doesn’t sound good, where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

On its surface, then, and maybe even *underneath* it, this is a troubling parable. And unlike many other troubling passages in the Bible – stories of genocide, rape, exploitation, and more – this passage is *included* in the Revised Common Lectionary, the three-year cycle of Biblical readings that many preachers follow on Sunday mornings.

So here we are this morning with a teaching that the early Jesus movement preserved first by word of mouth and then in writing and that the Revised Common Lectionary folks included, nearly 2000 years later, as an important text for Sunday morning worship in churches just like this one. Faced with that reality, I finally surrendered to this text, this story, and I invite you to do the same. I invite you to join me in believing, at least for a few minutes, that there is something in this morning’s parable that has been worth preserving. I invite you to join me in believing that there is some gift of healing or challenge or deepening in the Spirit in this ancient text. I invite you to join me in asking how God is seeking to make a difference in your life and in this congregation’s life through an odd story of masters, slaves, talents, and trade.

I think there are three keys that may unlock this parable’s puzzle and reveal its gifts for today. The first key lies in remembering that the Gospels record Jesus as someone who frequently spoke with rhetorical exaggeration and used surprising, even shocking, metaphors. The second key to opening this parable lies in considering what a “talent” was in 1st century Galilee and Judea. And the third key is contained in the three words of the third slave: “I was afraid.”

Back to the first key: the Gospels record Jesus speaking in metaphor, parable, and hyperbole – exaggerated speech never meant to be taken literally. For example, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says, “If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble or go

astray, cut it off. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out.” Although there may have been some lost souls over two millennia who’ve taken these words literally, there is no record that the people who heard Jesus’ words understood them to require amputations or self-inflicted blinding.

Likewise, in Matthew and the other gospels, Jesus is quoted as teaching about hell, everlasting fire, and this morning’s weeping and gnashing of teeth. But the Judaism of Jesus’ time, which means *Jesus’ Judaism*, did not conceive of a literal physical hell with everlasting fire. So when Jesus spoke of hell, fire, and eternal punishment, especially in parables, he was almost certainly using exaggerated metaphors to capture his listeners’ attention and to help them and us to understand that he is talking about something that is of great importance and great consequence.

Now, then, on to the second key to unlock this parable: just what were those talents the man left with his slaves? A talent wasn’t a simple coin, which is what I thought for a long time; it wasn’t the 1st century equivalent of a one hundred or a one thousand dollar bill. No, a talent was a coin or some other monetary measure that was worth *more than 15 years of a laborer’s wages*. A single talent represented a huge sum of money – what a hard-working laborer wouldn’t even be able to imagine saving up for himself or his family. So when the master in this parable gives one slave five talents, he is handing over something worth 75 years of hard work. Two talents represented 30 years of work, and even one talent, which the master gave to the third slave, was worth 15 years of hard-earned wages.

The second key to this morning’s parable, then, is related to the first. The second key is realizing that in this parable Jesus is trying to teach his listeners through surprising, extravagant, exaggerated metaphors. He’s asking his hearers to imagine someone who not only hands over great sums of money, even to the slave who received the least, but who also then goes away, who just leaves town. Jesus may have been using a relationship that was, unfortunately, easy for his early disciples to imagine – the relationship between master and slave – and inviting them to imagine God as the master who hands over more money, more value, more talent than his listeners ever thought they could receive. Jesus, in other words, may be inviting his listeners then and now to understand God as the One whose grace truly is amazing and whose blessing is extravagant.

... Which brings us to the third and final key for opening this parable: the simple, familiar words, “I was afraid.” After receiving something of great value and blessedness, the third slave is *afraid*., He is so afraid that he hides what he’s received.

Jesus has set the stage for this parable with a master handing over great wealth, entrusting his servants or slaves with more money than they could have ever imagined having. If the master in this parable does represent God, then Jesus is inviting his listeners to realize that the talents, the blessings, the grace that the Holy One gives us are all far greater than we can envision.

And having invited us to open our hearts and our lives to that abundance of blessing, Jesus gives us two examples of how we human folk respond to it. The first two slaves take the abundance of those talents, and use it. In the parable, a talent is currency – money – and the first two slaves trade with their talents. In *our* lives, the talents God gives us are holy love, blessing, grace, and guidance, and we can use them, offer them, and share them, and then watch the blessings grow and grow and grow.

But in the parable only two of the three embrace their talents. The third one in essence rejects the talent he has received and hides it in a hole in the ground. When the

master returns, the third slave explains that he was afraid ... afraid of his master, afraid of making mistakes with his one talent, afraid, perhaps, of being punished for failing to preserve his one talent. He describes the master as harsh and greedy but note that the master repeats the description without accepting it as accurate. He simply repeats it ... (but then, at the end of the parable, he does go on to act like someone who *is* harsh and greedy.)

Now, let's take a step back from the details of Jesus' parable, use our three keys, and ask that deeply theological question, "What's going on here?" Remember that Jesus used extreme and exaggerated metaphors to convey his message, realize that the talents in this parable represent great wealth or, perhaps more accurately, great grace and blessing, and then listen to the third slave's explanation, "I was afraid." What *is* going on here?

What's going on is that Jesus is trying to open our hearts and our minds to the God of extravagant welcome, abundant grace, and never-ending love. He's inviting us to realize that no earthly measure, no earthly experience can quite convey the fullness of God's gifts and blessings. And he is putting before us two roads we can take in response to that abundance: we can accept it and share it, putting it to use in the world *or* we can respond with fear, unwilling or unable to share it, hiding it away and hoping that we and everyone else will forget we ever had it in the first place.

The Holy One's invitation through Jesus, then, is to imagine the unimaginable – to imagine that we are given a life and a world of abundant grace – then to let that grace flow through us into the lives and hearts of others, where it will grow ever larger. And the Holy One's warning through Jesus is that the worst thing we can do in the face of God's gifts of those talents and that abundance is to be afraid. The saddest, truly tragic response is to be paralyzed by fear, so that we hide what God has given us, hide it from ourselves and everyone else. The biggest mistake we can make with those talents, the gifts of God's grace, is to be afraid to use them, share them, and risk offering them to our families, our friends, our world.

As I've worked with this parable this week, I've come to understand what that "outer darkness" with its tears and gnashing teeth might be. That outer darkness may be the place we enter when we worry, we fear, and we fret that God asks something from us *other* than that we simply offer to others what the Holy One has given to us. That outer darkness may be a place we can become trapped if we're afraid that there's one, single right way to offer the talents and gifts we've received. So the good news is that outer darkness is what we *don't* enter, as long as we're willing share what we've been given.

So if that fear the children and I talked about earlier in the service starts to cover you, risk taking off the blanket of fear, open your eyes, and you, too, may see that God's love for you is visible in face after face. Look around you and see the eyes of holy love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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