

Sermon
24 Pentecost—Proper 28-A-2
St. Andrew's, Methuen
November 15, 2020
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Zephaniah 1:7,12-18
Psalm 90:1-8, (9-11), 12
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

Years ago this parable of the Talents stopped being a prophetic teaching of Jesus and became a piece of conventional wisdom: We all grew up knowing that if you were given a talent, like an ability in music, science, or sports, you should dedicate significant effort to developing that talent, otherwise you are showing disrespect to God, the giver of all gifts.

So, parents: it is fine to encourage kids to practice their instruments and to play for Gramma at Christmas, as I had to do on my trumpet. Jesus is in favor of us developing our talents so we can add beauty to the world.

True as it may be this conventional wisdom also has the power to divert us away from the Realm of God that Jesus proclaims.

Consider how much damage can be done by those with a talent for making money who take this parable literally. This parable becomes a call to accumulate more and more wealth, even if it damages people along the way. How many, I wonder, use the line, "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" to justify the incredible disparity between rich and poor in our country: Like the disparity between the salary of a CEO and an average worker in the company. According to CNBC, **"Since 1978, compensation rose 1,007.5% for CEOs, compared with 11.9% for average workers....In comparative terms, CEOs now make 312 times the average worker. If you go back to 1965, the ratio of CEO-to-worker pay was 20 times.**

Do any of us think Jesus approves of this wealth grab at the expense of the American worker?

Nothing in his life and teaching makes us think Jesus encourages and blesses such inequality. In the gospels Jesus sides with the poor and tells the rich they're gonna have a hard time getting through that eye of the needle into the God's Realm.

We remember the example of chief tax-collector Zacchaeus who once he is grasped by Jesus's good news of the Realm of God, proclaims he is going to give half his wealth to the poor and pay back those he robbed four times over. This is the transformation Jesus wants to see, not the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

So, our conventional reading that sees God as the wealthy master and the slaves that double his assets as the heroes of the story, goes against everything Jesus lives and dies for. But this view of the parable does fit rather nicely inside the story of the American Dream of unchecked capitalism that making lots of money is the highest goal to which anyone can aspire.

Further, when the master yells at the third slave that he should have at least taken his Talent, in first century terms about a million dollars, to bankers to receive interest on his money, he is recommending something explicitly forbidden in Jewish law. As we are told in Deuteronomy 23:19: **"You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent."**

Whatever we want to make of this parable surely for Jesus the master is not God.

This is why some Biblical scholars now believe the hero of the story is the third slave. He is the one who refuses to participate in obscene moneymaking as well as refusing to violate the law against charging interest to his neighbor. Also, he has the courage to speak truth to power when he accurately describes the master by saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground."

But you say, he ends up being thrown into outer darkness—how does that represent the Realm of God?

In three days, Jesus, who also refuses to idolize money, will be himself thrown into the outer darkness of the cross by violent men who are just like the master in the parable. Jesus repeatedly tells the disciples to take up their cross and follow him to that place where God's Realm is revealed in self-sacrificing Love.

 This parable reminds me of all things the 1999 classic romantic comedy "Pretty Woman", which perhaps a few of you have seen:

The plot is very simple: down-on-her-luck prostitute Vivian, played by Julia Roberts, is hired by high-powered corporate raider Edward Lewis, played by Richard Gere, to be his companion for several days, as he meets with the owner of a company Lewis intends to buy and then destroy by selling off the assets and firing lots of workers.

In the course of a few days Vivian, like the third slave, refuses to support these destructive business practices and stands up to the wealthy man and his greed and like the third slave ends up back in the darkness of her previous life. But in a twist Jesus I'm sure appreciates, Lewis has a conversion experience and helps save the struggling family business instead of destroying it. And at the end Lewis falls in love with Vivian and goes to find her because she has saved his soul.

The conventional and the unconventional reading of this parable have one central thing in common: both lift up the ones who take a great risk. In the conventional reading the two slaves who double their master's money must face the very possible prospect of losing his money because you can't double your investment without taking huge risks.

Likewise, in the unconventional reading of the parable the third slave who buries the master's money in order not to participate in his destructive business practices, **takes a huge risk** and ends up experiencing the master's wrath.

So both readings encourage risk-taking.

As I heard a pilot once say: "No guts, no air medal."

To move more deeply into the realm of God Peter, Andrew, James, and John have to leave their nets and follow Jesus.

So here's the deal: To move more deeply into the realm of God the church must do the same thing, though we may be quite reluctant! As Fred Craddock puts it: **"Fear of failure, fear of punishment, fear of loss have not only paralyzed the third slave but also many congregations."** 280

But when we are grasped by the Realm of God **our courage rises** and we grow in trust of the presence of Christ and the abundance of God.

As you fill out your pledge cards, let us live into this courage, so that by giving generously to God's work through the church we will make more visible the Beauty, justice, and abundance of God.