

Proper 28A: Matthew 25: 14-30
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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“Safe and Sorry”

Today’s Gospel is one of those occasions when we might wish Jesus would stop talking. I mean, the parable Jesus tells this morning starts off well. But then he keeps going, adding to the story in a way we would just as soon he left out.

Jesus begins, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a rich man who goes away on a business trip and leaves his massive fortune to his trusted servants to use while he’s gone. To one, he gave five talents, to another three, and to the third just one.” To be clear, we are talking about money here, not “talents” as in gifts or abilities that people have. “Talent” originally was a unit of weight for precious metals. Specifically, a talent was about eighty pounds of silver, which is the weight of 6,000 denarii or 70 years of wages for a laborer! So we’re talking about money, lots of money, heaping bags of money that the rich man was throwing around!

For amiable mainline preachers like myself, this is a great story to work with. If I preached on it, I’d begin by talking about what a talented group of people you are. I might point out some of the talents that I’ve seen God disperse throughout our congregation and the ways you have used those talents to bless others. I would note that some of you are definitely multi-talented folks, good at many different things. Others of you have one wonderful talent, and you use that talent well. You are not a great pianist, but you are a great baker. You are not much of an organizer but you love to teach, say. Then I’d encourage you to utilize your gifts, to develop your talents, and let those abilities take you places.

Trouble is, as much as I might like to preach that sermon, and as much as you might enjoy hearing it, I don’t think that’s the thrust of Jesus’s parable. I mean, “God is a generous God who graciously gives us talents. Use your talents well.”—that sounds more like a high school graduation speech than a sermon!

But that’s what I’d say...if Jesus had ended his story where we would have liked him to end it. But of course that’s not what happens. Jesus goes on to tell what the three servants did with their talents, how they used them and how much they had gained in return. And the master rejoices in their work: “Well done, good and faithful servants. You have been faithful in little, now you shall be entrusted with much. Enter into your master’s joy.” That’s what he says to the servants...well, at least to two of them. The other servant, the one with just the one, he didn’t do anything with his talent. He just buried it, kept it safe, so that he could return it when his master came back.

Now, in a world where there are no banks, burying his treasure may seem a sensible, prudent, responsible thing to do—better than risk losing it gambling in Vegas—but it’s clearly not what the owner had in mind. In fact, it was precisely opposite to what he wanted of his servants. He wanted them to know something of the joy he knew making all this money. But the third servant,

he responded to the great gift with a “No thanks.” He opted out. Instead of accepting the gift and using it, he did nothing at all with it, literally burying it in the ground.

What went wrong here? Why did the one-talent servant refuse to share in the master’s plan? The most obvious answer, I suppose, is simple laziness. The one-talent servant did not want to put forth the effort to do anything constructive with the wealth he’d been entrusted. Burying his talent in the ground was far easier, the lazy way of handling the responsibility of the money.

Another possible explanation is jealousy. The servant with the one talent was bound to have noticed the two other servants had been entrusted several times what he’d been given. And so, fixating on the hands *they* had been dealt, rather than the possibilities that were his to exercise, the third servant lost his focus and got deflected from his mission.

Ok, that’s another possibility. A third reason could have been that the smallness of his talent led him to think that what he did with it did not matter, . . . except that what he had been given wasn’t really small at all. Remember, he’d been given *a talent*, a huge bag of silver coins—worth something like \$1.5 million dollars today. Hardly a small sum. More than most of us would ever see in our lives. So, while the other servants got more, this slave wasn’t hurting for money.

A still further possibility is that the slave believed that the security of the life he has right now, with his fortune tucked away safe, is better than the life that could be, and therefore he sought to keep things the same. We in the church know something of what that is like. I titled the new monthly rector’s forum “But we’ve always done it that way . . .” in part because I want to share the history of the things we Christians do, the tradition, but equally as a joke, as an expression of how many Christians just want things in the church to stay the same, to preserve the “way they’ve always been.” But of course things have not “always been this way.” Nor was there ever a time, a Golden Age, in the church’s life, even in the 70s or 80s, when the church stood still, unchanging. Even if that was true, how sad would it be to think that the best we can hope for has already passed. And how tragic it would be for this slave to think that this present life, with money in the ground, is the best he can hope for.

Now, in all honesty, there may be something of each of these explanations for why the slave did nothing with his money. But there’s a deeper issue here, one the slave himself admits to—mistrust. “I knew that you were a harsh man,” he says the master. He then accuses him of being dishonest, and claims it was fear that compelled him to bury the talent. “Who knows what someone like you would have done to me if I had lost it?,” he thought to himself. Then he returned the talent saying, “Here’s your money. You can have it back.”

It seems from these words that, even though he’d been given the talent like the other servants had been given theirs, he never felt the talent was really his. It still belonged to his boss. There are still strings attached. And he’s not wrong. The master did care about what his slaves did with their money, only not in the tyrannical way he assumes. The way Jesus tells the story, the master is anything but hardhearted. He gave vast amounts of money to his servants. And then he was demonstrably delighted with the first two who they had used the money well, to make more money. And it doesn’t say he took the money back from them, but let them keep it. Hardly hard-

hearted! Yet what the one-talent servant expected was judgment. And it made him anxious, made him fearful.

And that fear distorted his view of his situation and of his master. The one-talent slave saw his situation as one of danger rather than opportunity, and the owner as exploitative rather than generous—the same guy who had given him a million dollars to play with! I mean, if Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk dropped a few billion on me and then let me keep it, whatever else I think about either man, I'm not likely to call him stingy. But that's what fear does, it distorts things. It distorts our vision of reality.

It reminds me of the scene with the dwarves at the end of CS Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia." The Jesus-figure Aslan takes Lucy, Edmund, Peter and everyone to the New Narnia, to what we would call "heaven" or the New Creation. It is a place of astonishing light and beauty; a place where every blade of grass seems to mean more, where every creature sings for the sheer joy of the Creator, where the sight of a common daisy is enough to take your breath away.

But then, in the midst of all this splendor, a group of dwarves are huddled together, convinced that they are sitting in the rank stench of a barn. Lucy is so upset that the dwarves are not enjoying the New Narnia that she begs Aslan to help them to see. Aslan replies, "Dearest Lucy, I will show you what I can do and what I cannot do." Aslan then shakes his golden mane and a sumptuous banquet instantly appears in front of the dwarves. Each dwarf is given a plate heaped with juicy meats, glistening vegetables, plump grains of rice. Each also receives a goblet brimming with the finest wine anyone could ever imagine.

But when the dwarves dive in and begin eating, they start gagging and complaining. "Doesn't this beat all," they lament. "Not only are we in this stinking stable but now we've got to eat hay and dried cow dung as well!" When they sip the wine, they sputter, "And look at this now! Dirty water out of a donkey's trough!" The dwarves, Aslan goes on to say, had chosen suspicion instead of trust and love. They were prisoners of their own minds. They could not accept Aslan's gift of the New Narnia for they would not see it. They are imprisoned in a hell of their own devising.

Something like that is how this slave distorts the intentions of his master. The slave projected onto his benefactor the very meanness that was in his own soul. We do not know where this fearful picture came from, but because of his fear of failing, of not getting approval, of shame, he could not recognize the master for who he is, and could not enjoy him like the other servants can.

This is a perennial problem for us too. As the servant does to the master, we project onto God what we expect him to be—whether it is a demanding and merciless law-giver, a disapproving father, a solicitous and permissive parent. We project onto God our fears and wishes, and they distort our view of him, becoming obstacles to our knowing and enjoying God.

More than anything else, such distortions are what Jesus came to cast out. Back at the beginning in the Garden, the serpent put the whole human race off-track by casting aspersions on God's character, causing Adam and Eve to distrust God. They projected onto God what this slave

projected on to his master - that God was hard, cruel, dishonest, and untrustworthy. It was to undo this misrepresentation that Jesus entered into history.

“Jesus was God's answer to the problem of a bad reputation,” John Killinger suggests. Jesus came to “show us the Father” and disprove forever the devil’s distortions. These distortions, these false images of what God is like only get in the way of our knowing and loving God. They cause us to refuse the gifts God gives, and so miss out on the generous life he intends for us. For, when we picture God fearfully, instead of lovingly, we see only danger and threats to our well-being. It’s a cramped, cold, suffocating existence. This is what it is to live “in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.” That doesn’t describe an existence reserved only for after we die. It’s a kind of life we can confine ourselves to living here and now. It’s what comes of having a distorted vision of God, rather than seeing God truly.

You see, this parable isn’t really about money, at least not first about money. Nor is it about talents as in skills and aptitudes we have been born with. It’s not even about productivity, as though all the master cared about was his servants turning a profit. No, the story is about how we see God. For, how we look at God, whether with fear or with love, determines how we see the world and our role in it. It determines whether we are cramped in by fear, fear of punishment or disapproval, or whether we are freed to risk, to accept the invitation to adventure, to capitalize on our gifts for the sake of the larger mission. God, the Master, is not concerned about losing everything nor does he want us to be afraid of risking ourselves. He wants us to accept the challenge, to embrace the adventure, not knowing whether we will fail or succeed, but confident in our future, because we know our God is a good and generous Master, who longs to say to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.” Those words are worth more than any earthly treasure. Thanks be to God!