

Sermon: "A Terrible Parable"**Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: November 19, 2017**

This is a terrible parable that Jesus tells. It's terribleness is often white-washed as we hear preachers using it to encourage congregations to use their talents wisely for the glory of God, or around stewardship time, to invest their talents in the work of the church, or you might have heard one of the phrases from this parable at a funeral where the minister will quote on behalf of the deceased – "well done, good and faithful servant, enter the joy of your master," removing the statement completely out of context. And finally, believe it or not, it's really not a parable extolling the virtues of free market capitalism, where Jesus is finally affirming how one can get rich off of investment schemes. Instead, it's one of Jesus' terrible parables and especially modern readers of the western world must beware because it's a doozy of a story that will not go down lightly.

So I share with you this morning an interpretation of this parable that is the polar opposite to how it is usually told and, I would say, finally makes sense of it. Much of this I am indebted to the American political theologian named Ched Myers whose writings on scripture from the socio-cultural and economic context of the ancient Mediterranean world will often knock your socks off! So hang on for here we go – the parable of the talents.

To read this parable accurately we have to know what in the world a "talent" is. It is not "a special natural ability or aptitude," so immediately interpreters who suggest that this is about not burying our

gifts and abilities but using them to glory God are soft-pedaling and making metaphor where Jesus did not intend it. A “talent” in ancient Palestine is an absurdly large sum of money. One denarius in the Hellenistic world was an average subsistence wage for a full-day’s labor and one talent was worth 6,000 denarii. You could say that one talent was the equivalent of 15 years of wages to most of the people listening to Jesus’ story. So this man in the story, who would be understood by the listeners to be the wealthy master of a large estate (the closest thing to a corporation in antiquity) who would go away to conduct his business while slaves would be put in charge and those slaves would develop a hierarchy of stewards of the estate, though called slaves were well above in wealth and position the laborers and farmers that made up the majority peasant class. So as the parable goes, the master gives 5 talents to one slave, 2 talents to another slave and 1 talent to the final slave. These are huge financial dealings!

Jesus explains to his listeners that the first two slaves double their master’s investment. 10 talents and 4 talents! While a modern reader of the western world might celebrate that – wow, good for them, now that is sound investing! – this would have elicited immediate disgust from Jesus’ first century audience. For them to have doubled their already vast sum of money would have been obviously understood as crooked, as only having been accomplished through the most predatory of ways – extortion, fraud, tax collecting, and lending money at illegal rates of interest. The original audience of Jesus’ parable would have been disgusted at such rapaciousness but the master says “well done, good and faithful servants, enter into the joy of your master!” However

through our capitalist lenses of the last two centuries we've applauded and lauded those servants saying "hooray! They made the most from what they were given!"

And to the 3rd slave, we've said "booooooo!". "What a loser!" He took what was given him and buried it in the ground, the cautious, unproductive loser slave! Not doing anything with his talents, boooo!" Without ever stopping to think that he might very well be the hero of this terrible parable... much like Jesus himself, the crucified one, is a hero of a different order of things.

So after affirming the first two slaves – "well done, good and faithful servants", the master turns to the third slave and says "well, what do you have to say for yourself?" And the slave says – "I took your money and I buried it in the ground." Now pause there for a moment. Ched Myers reminds us that many in Jesus' audience were farmers and that this moment could very well have drawn chuckles from them, some wry peasant humor. Farmers who worked the land understood that true wealth came from God and was all wrapped up in the planting and growing and harvesting and dependence on the seasons and God's grace therein, which would yield their sustenance. To plant silver in the ground would yield nothing. So Myers says "Here is the clash between two economic worldviews: the traditional agrarian notion of use-value the elite's currency-based system of exchange-value. Money cannot grow the natural way like seed, only unnaturally, through usury and swindling. So this symbolic act of "planting" the talent was a case of prophetic tricksterism done to reveal that the money is not fertile?"

Then the third slave blows the whistle on the master. He says “I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” He profits and gathers his wealth off of the backbreaking labor of others and in fact admits it – “oh you knew that about me did you?” And so in response the 3rd slave buries the money, takes it out of circulation where it can no longer be used to exploit others and in the end hands it back to him saying “Here, take back what is yours.” He is of course maligned by the master as evil and lazy – the favorite slur of the wealthy against those who don’t play the game right or well - and he makes an example of the 3rd slave, taking the single talent from him and giving it to the obedient slave saying: “For to those who have, more will be given, but for those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.” And he is thrown “into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.” And in the usual way of interpreting this parable we have equated the Master with God. Can you imagine?

Being thrown into the outer darkness is also often interpreted as the afterlife experience of hell – bury your talents and you’ll go to hell – Nice! - but really it’s once again a distortion of Jesus’ parable. The outer darkness is clearly that place where the poor and dispossessed live their lives outcast from the privileged, dominant culture and the light-filled royal courts. That’s where the unproductive and lazy third slave who won’t play by the rules goes at the end of the terrible parable. But what’s interesting is that in the very next words of the Gospel of Matthew, still in chapter 25, Jesus talks about where and how we will meet him and he says you’ll meet me among the thirsty and hungry and

imprisoned – those in the outer darkness - for whenever you give them food or water or visit them you are doing so to me. And his terrible parable is complete.

Ched Myers says this after unpacking this parable:

We have for too long ignored or trivialized these parables as arcane, pedantic, or platitudinous, ever hoping to keep aright the world they mean to turn upside down. But... Jesus used these “folksy” stories to expose the most entrenched arrangements of power and privilege, whether Roman militarism or Judean elitism. He challenged the “tall trees” of imperial domination with his “mustard seed” movement of... justice. And he called for renewed resistance to usurious “business as usual” in Israel, a costly vocation of truth [that had brutal] consequences. Only by bringing the parables back down to earth can we encounter their power both to unmask the “real world” in its cruelty and presumption, and to proclaim the radical hope of God’s sovereignty, buried like a seed in the hard soil of our history.

As we move towards a week of thanks giving, may those of us, like myself, gathering in homes of wealth and around tables of great abundance be mindful of the 3rd slaves in our midst, those who have not fared as well as we have within the system, either the family system or the economic system that leaves some tables much more spare or empty than most of ours. The 3rd slave, the one labeled wicked and lazy by those in power, is Christ in our midst, whether she’s sitting beside us at the thanksgiving table or standing homeless on the street corner as we run back to the grocery for that ingredient that we forgot. Christ is in the outer darkness as much if not more than Christ is in the warm inner light. Amen.