

Sunday November 19th, 2017

Proper 28

PRAYER: O God, you are a faithful lover. We trust you, for you do good all the days of your life. You create with willing hands, rejoicing in your labour. You open your hands to the poor and reach out to the needy. Let us love you as you love us. Then we will love our neighbours as you love them. Amen.

OFFERTORY: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Hebrews 13:16

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious God, you are the Lord of all seasons, especially the seasons of our hearts. You are mindful and responsive to our cries of joy and celebration, as much as our deep heart wrenching lamentations. You see our need whether in the brightness of the noon-day sun, or in the inky blackness of the darkest night. David the psalmist captured our feelings fully when he recognized that there is no place we can ever run to hide from you, and frankly, many of us are tired trying to escape you. In our brokenness, and our need, we do not want to languish in hidden realms, but rather to be embraced and held tightly to your chest.

When our relationships are strained and fractured, we need your friendship and companionship. When our bodies are broken, or sick, we need the great physician. As our minds swirl in confusion, and troubles, we need the Great Counsellor. In the midst of strife among our neighbours, our families, and even as a nation, how we long for the Prince of Peace. If nothing else, O God, we have learned by experience that we cannot journey through this life with any sense of meaning and hope, without you along side us, and even often carrying us.

We as your creatures take great pride in our accomplishments and our ingenuity. We stand in the public square, and love to shout our own praises, “Look at what we have done.” But in reality, what most us experience is hardly anything to brag about. How much of what we have claimed to have made, was built with: selfishness, exploitation, and even motivated by fear. For all our achievements we still suffer as a people. Sure, we have fancy gadgets, magnificent buildings, entertainment beyond compare; but we still long for peace, and meaning, and love. Have we really advanced as a people? Are we better off than our ancestors? Sure, we live longer and can do marvelous things, but we still mistreat one another, judge those who are different and live in fear.

Wake us up out of our slumber, O God. Help us to see that no matter how smart and creative we are, we can never save ourselves. Our earthly treasures are worthless in the grand scheme of things. How soon we forget the sage advice that we gain nothing if we possess the whole world, but forfeit our souls. And frankly, we know only too well, that we are readily willing to forfeit our souls, to sell our birthrights for a pot of stew.

Forgive our foolishness, and our short-sightedness. Restore some sanity to our inner conflict between your truth, and what the world claims as truth. Remind us regularly where our loyalty should lie. Help us to choose the light over the darkness.

O Gracious Father, you know the struggles among your people. Even today among us are: those who are ill, those who struggle with emotional health, financial health, and some whose relationships with a spouse, child, or friend are less than ideal. We all need a word from you today, to speak into our hearts. Help us to hear your voice through the din of our busy minds and busy lives. Restore again our joy, to be among your people. May our fellowship, and our worship be authentic and heartfelt. Help us to listen to one another beyond the words; to really dwell in the presence of one another. May we know each other as people of love, compassion and grace.

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Matthew 25: 14-30

“A Talent for Trouble”

One day a man goes to a pet shop to buy a parrot. The sales clerk takes the man to the parrot section, and asks him to choose one. The man asks, “How much is the yellow one?” The clerk replies that it costs \$2,000. The man is shocked, and asks the assistant why it’s so expensive. “This parrot is a very special one. He can type really fast.” “What about the green one?” the man asks. “He costs \$5,000 because he can type, answer incoming phone calls and takes notes.” “What about the red one?” the man asks. The clerk says, “That one’s \$10,000.” Curious, the man asks, “What does *he* do?” The clerk says, “I don’t know, but the other two call him boss.”

What has been your experience of working for someone else? Whether for the owner of the company you worked for, or a foreperson, or chief administrator: what was and is it like for you to answer to someone else. I started early in this experience. I was just ten years old when I encountered my first boss. My brother Ian, and I, went to work picking strawberries for Mr. Howe, whose small farm on Tollgate Road was very close to where we lived. I guess my mom thought it would be a good idea for us to earn some pocket money and keep busy.

And I know you are wondering how I made out on my first job. Not very well, since I was fired on my first day. As was my brother. It seems that Mr. Howe did not appreciate us having strawberry fights in his patch, ruining his berries. Well, Mr. Howe was fully in his right to get rid of us, and frankly if it were me today, I’d have done the same. Our parable today is about working for someone.

In the parable of the talents, which is likely familiar to many of you, there is a sentence that literally screams off the page at me, demanding attention. When the slave who was given one talent is asked to give an accounting of what he did with what was entrusted with him, he begins his reply with these cutting words, “Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.”

In other words, this master, this boss, is an absolute ogre; a scoundrel. I don’t care what anyone says, who would ever want to work for this guy, but, here’s the rub, these men in the parable were not employees, they were slaves. They were bonded to their master; he owned them. They were property. So, what do I do with this parable; after all, how is this passage most often approached? How many times have we heard from a preacher something like this...

“Jesus is the master in this parable. He is coming back. He has entrusted you with talents, which we take to mean abilities and skills. Some have more talents than others, so God does not distribute evenly. Jesus expects when he returns to see a return on his investment in us. This is how the Kingdom of God works, so get with the program. Hallelujah! Amen! Let’s pass the offering plates!” Is this what you normally hear as an interpretation of this parable? Is that what you expected today?

I understand how this interpretation comes about, and I have myself followed this tract other times when I’ve preached on this parable.

The parable does fall in the section of Matthew, in which Matthew is urging us to prepare for Christ inevitable return. But before we dive too deep, we need to ask to whom is this parable directed? Remember, Matthew is very careful about telling us who Jesus is addressing. In this case this whole section is addressed to the disciples. Pushing the above interpretation of this parable, is the parable preceding it about the ten bridesmaids. The one about some not keeping their lamps filled with oil; not being ready for the bridegrooms return.

And immediately on the heels of the *Parable of Talents* is the *Parable of the Sheep and Goats* which we will deal with next week. So, it would seem in context of this chapter that the traditional interpretation holds up. However, I am still not satisfied with this interpretation. Something still seems off to me. There are still things in this *Parable of the Talents* that make me question whether we are listening to it properly?

First of all, there is a blatant element of unfairness described in this parable. Did you catch it? The word translated as talent is the first problem we encounter. The word here is a monetary unit; actually, the highest monetary unit of Jesus' day. One talent represented the wages of a labourer for about 15 years. Jesus is talking about money.

It likely is an abuse of the passage to suggest that the word here can be used equally to mean skills, or gifts. For example, "He or she is a talented person". That's the first problem. The second is that the talents, are not distributed evenly. The talents were distributed to each slave in "accordance with their abilities". That's what the bible says. It appears to me, that the master knew before he even left, that the third slave was not all that skilled in business.

While the first man sounds like he has got his act together, and can outshine the others, the third man from the get go, is in over his head with a fraction of what was entrusted to the first servant. Furthermore, the language around the master's reaction to the first two servant's results is odd. A talent was a huge amount of money in Jesus day, so five, and even two were vast sums.

So, the Master says, "You've been trustworthy in a few things". Are you kidding me? A few things? It's like me saying to anyone of you, "Gee do you mind managing my fortune 500 company for me while I go on an extended Caribbean vacation. Don't worry it's just a little job." The more I dwell on this scenario, the more confused and disturbed I become. Am I really supposed to see Jesus as this frightening, demanding master, sowing and reaping wherever he pleases, and you better shape up, and do your part?

Don't worry that I have five talents, or two, or even one, mind your own responsibilities in the Kingdom of God. Not very nice eh? I admit that Matthew is into so much despair and judgment, and gnashing of teeth, one might wonder who rained on his parade. So, is that what is going on here, and if it is, then how then do I feel about my faith, and about Jesus? A couple of weeks ago I asked you if we portrayed Jesus as too soft, well not in these chapter 25 parables.

I really wrestled with this passage, in fact this whole chapter. I didn't like it very much, that is until I asked myself one vital question. A question we can use with every biblical passage. What is the central point of this parable? What is the main take away from this passage?

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I think I should tell you that first of all, there are some things that I don't think are really at the heart of this parable, but rather just elements on which to hang the main point. Some of this will surprise you, and probably stoke significant debate among us. I don't think this parable is really about talents as we use the word. That is, it is not about skills, or gifts. There I said it.

I also don't think this is a parable about how Jesus looks at us. He said of himself that he came to serve, not to be served, so why in the world would he want to portray himself in such a harsh manner? I am not even sure if this parable is really about the second coming, or preparing for it, or even about judgement. These elements maybe there, and it is located in this chapter on the second coming, but that may have been done by an editor, looking for consistency in themes.

Regardless, I don't believe these elements are the hinge on which this parable hangs. So, you may ask, what's left? Well, when you remove everything else, whatever is left is the nugget of gold. If, as I suspect, that this parable is based on elements that Jesus' audience would readily understand, and identify with. Then could it be that this is an economic tale, used to convey a deeper spiritual truth. This scenario is not all that hard for Jesus' listeners to imagine. They know all about how masters and slaves fit into their society.

They understand how the master is within his rights to give out responsibilities, and resources, to whoever and however he wishes. They also know masters can be harsh people, making demands as they see fit. Remember, slaves are seen as property.

The master was also within his rights to expect results, and to punish those who failed to meet expectations. Just like Mr. Howe in the strawberry field. So, I think Jesus is using this challenging parable, to focus his listeners on the third slave, and on this third slave's motivation for doing what he did. Did you see it in the parable? Can we agree that this slave was paralyzed to inaction? His fellow slaves, who got greater amounts to care for, perhaps intimidated him, but more to the point, what was his vision of his master?

After the third man received his one talent, the master went away. So, let's draw ourselves a mental picture of the scene. Picture this man standing there, holding more money than he had likely ever seen, or would ever own himself, and he began to assess his situation. "It's a lot of money" he must have thought. "What if I misplace it, or it is stolen, or I try to use it in business and it is lost, how can I ever hope to repay it?" The man is well acquainted with his master's business practices. He is aggressive, demanding and influential.

The third slave has seen his boss steamroll over the competition. The master is a man who demands the best of himself, and his slaves. Before too long, the third slave is unnerved. His insecurity grows. He doesn't know what to do, except to hold onto what he already has. He stagnates. Nothing changes for him, or in him, while the master is away. In his assessment of his situation, and his relationship with his master, he comes to one inevitable outcome, "I was afraid." And frankly, most of us would be as well. Responsibilities can overwhelm us.

Nowhere in this parable, is this third slave's assessment of his situation ever disputed. No one said to this poor guy, "Oh, you got it all wrong. Our master is a good guy. Don't worry."

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Even the master does not deny he is a hard man, nor are we told that the other two slaves had a different view of the master. Maybe they too were afraid, because they knew what kind of a man this master was, but they overcame it, and made a return on what was entrusted to them.

So, I began to wonder if the point of this parable is not about judgement, or the second coming per se, but could it be about the major element running through out it? Could this famous parable about the talents, really be more accurately about fear, and what it does to us? Because everyone, save the master, is afraid in this story. I bet the motivation of the first two slaves to do well with their talents, was induced primarily by fear.

There once was this criminal who had committed a crime. (Because, hey, that's what criminals do. That's their job!) Anyway, he was sent to the king for his punishment. The king told him he had a choice of two punishments. He could be hung by a rope or take what's behind the big, dark, scary, iron door. The criminal quickly decided on the rope. As the noose was being slipped on him, he turned to the king and asked. "By the way, out of curiosity, what's behind that door?"

The king laughed and said: "You know, it's funny, I offer everyone the same choice, and nearly everyone picks the rope." "So," said the criminal, "Tell me. What's behind the door? I mean, obviously, I won't tell anyone," he said, pointing to the noose around his neck. The king paused then answered, "Freedom, but it seems most people are so afraid of the unknown that they immediately take the rope."

How many times have we been induced to produce results because we fear judgement, loss of employment, or loss of prestige. First all, let's state the obvious: fear is real. We all know that and we all experience fear. Fear paralyzes us; makes us do foolish things, and keeps us from life enhancing experiences. Fear leads to fractured relationships, sin, and I think darkness, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. However, fear steals something even more vital from us; joy.

Notice in the parable, the first two slaves who doubled the money entrusted to them, get more responsibility, but also as a reward, "the joy of the master". Eugene Petersen translates this in an interesting way, "From now on you will be my partner." In other words, an equal participant. Petersen is suggesting that the third slave, crushed by fear, missed out on the full opportunity awaiting him. In other words, partnering with the master.

1 John 4:18 reads, "Perfect love casts out fear." If taking risks with this master's money led to advancement, imagine what getting beyond fear will gain us in the Kingdom of God. Imagine that in taking risks, investing what has been entrusted to us by God, we become God's partners. We enter into his joy. Fear, whatever its source, is keeping us from great things. Personally, I regret how dominated by fear I have been at different times of my life.

As someone plagued by anxiety, to the point of developing an upset stomach, and even physical pain, I admit I almost fear the fear. Sometimes we call it worry, or stress, but it really is just fear. And all of us fear something, maybe several things.

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Every year about now, television networks begin running that old chestnut of a Christmas special called, “Charlie Brown’s Christmas”. I like to remind people that Charles Shultz based this little comic strip on his own life, and many of the elements in it come from his experiences. The whole premise of the Christmas special, circles around Charlie Brown feeling depressed at Christmas, because he cannot capture its true meaning.

It doesn’t help when his friends chastise him for not buying into the commercialization of the season. Like buying aluminum Christmas trees, or Lucy wanting to insert in the nativity play a character called a “Snow Queen”. One telling little scene, has Charlie Brown coming to Lucy’s Psychiatry booth, and expressing his angst about Christmas. Lucy surmises that Charlie Brown is overcome by fear, and she proceeds to ask a series of questions about what he is afraid of, using the Latin names for the variety of sources for fear.

Finally, she suggests that maybe Charlie Brown suffers from pantophobia. He says, “What is that?” Lucy responds, “It means the fear of everything.” To which an excited Charlie Brown shouts, “That’s it!” knocking Lucy off her seat. Do we suffer from Pantaphobia? How much of the “joy of God” do we miss out on because of our fear? How stunted is our partnership with God, because we do not rest our assurance and trust on him?

Let me suggest to help us all, that we regularly visit, and read aloud Paul’s declaration of confidence, in the face of fear. Romans 8:37-39, “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, not powers, nor heights, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Are we more than conquerors? Are we confident enough to spend, and be spent for the Kingdom of God? I hope so, because I would rather be a person of joy than one of fear.

BENEDICTION: People of Christ, encourage and build up one another. Strengthen the fainthearted, lift up the weak, be patient with the anxious, and rejoice in all circumstances. The One who calls you is faithful; the God of peace shall make you whole.