

Swimming Against the Current
Matthew 25:14-30
November 15, 2020

The small Christian community in Thessalonica in 51 AD were concerned about those close to them who had died. They are feeling nervous about their fate in light of the seemingly delay in Christ's return. Surrounded by a culture dedicated to the god Caesar, feeling perhaps vulnerable and insecure in their new faith in Jesus, and challenged by the moral permissiveness in the society around them, they had lots to concern them. But high on the list of concerns was the destiny of uncle John, and aunt Matilda. So Paul sets out to clarify the situation. He reminds them that the date is unknowable, but what is clear is the sudden, glorious appearing of the Lord. He reminds them that: ***For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.***
(1Thessalonians 5:2)

This teaching is writ large all over the Gospels and letters of Paul. Indeed, Matthew, Mark and Luke devote an entire chapter to this subject we call the Parousia (the second coming of our Lord). Throughout Matthew 24 we read of this persistent theme: the date is uncertain so you must remain vigilant. What is certain is his return. Matthew then offers several parables to drive the point home. The first is the story of the master who leaves his slave in charge of the household. If during the delay the slave mistreats the others he will be punished. Last week we saw what happened to the five bridesmaids who were unprepared for the bridegroom's return. They were shut out of the wedding feast. Today we have the parable of the talents.

Each of these parables are intended to help us take stock of our lives. Each one stresses the need to be faithful and busy with God's kingdom work. In each parable those unprepared falls under dark shadow of judgment and are excluded from the kingdom.

On the face of it the parable seems straightforward! One man gets five talents, one two and another one. Two of them eagerly respond to their master's trust in them by investing their talents and making

double. After a long time, the master returned to settle accounts. He is delighted and effusive in his praise for the two who doubled his property. They are called, *good and trustworthy*. Their reward is to be elevated to a position where they are in charge of many things.

Finally, the one who received the one talent comes forward. He has a very different response from his fellow slaves. While they went out and risked, invested, and used the talents they were given, he decided to protect it. Instead of using it or investing it, he went and buried it so it would never be lost. The reason he did this is critical to the parable. He did so because his attitude to the master was one of mistrust and fear. The one who received only one talent saw his master as a harsh taskmaster. So, he buried the talent he was given. We know that a talent was a huge amount of capital: it represented twenty years wages for a labourer. A talent is equivalent to several million dollars in our money.

Now if you will allow me, I want to look at this differently. Usually we use this parable for a Stewardship Sunday where we are encouraged to use our talents of “time, gifts, and treasure” for the kingdom. Important as that is, what if that is not at all what Jesus is getting at. The questions this parable raises for me are twofold: who does the master represent in the parable, and who is the third servant? What you see, all too often, is just what you get. Perhaps this parable is inviting us to examine closely the pictures of God I believe we each carry around inside of us. Is God gracious or stern, loving or judgmental, eager for peace or prone to violence. We might further ask whether the picture we carry matches the picture of the God we know in Jesus or may have been shaped by other persons and events in our lives.

This parable of the talents teaches that we can be paralyzed by our fear of God’s judgment and don’t use our gifts for the kingdom. So, first, don’t get wrapped up in the importance of your possessions (bringing your oil drums as in the previous parable) so that they become your God, but also do not become neglectful of our gifts.

Yes, we can interpret this parable in the traditional way. This would simply mean that we ought not bury our talents. For talents here are probably best understood as the gifts God gives us to use for the

building of the kingdom: whether spiritual gifts, or our economic resources. Today, because our lives are so cluttered with busyness and with possessions, we probably find it easier to act like the one who only received one talent. In the current climate of market chaos and economic uncertainty it would be natural for us to bury our talents to keep them safe. We do this all time in our churches. We are very conservative with our moneys in the bank.

But there is another way of approaching this parable which on reflection makes more sense of the biblical context. The unchallenged premise of the parable is that the divine figure of the story is “***a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.***” That is the very opposite of the God of Israel who brought God’s people into a land flowing with milk and honey. It is unlike the God who tells harvesters to leave a portion of the field for the poor to harvest. It is equally unlike Jesus’ sower who goes out and throws seed wastefully all over the place, knowing that whatever lands on the good soil will produce beyond one’s wildest dream. It can be argued that the “lazy” servant’s depiction of the master is not the God made known in Christ.

Likewise, the assumed moral of the story is also problematic: “For to all those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” This moral directly contradicts the biblical message. It is contrary to the warnings Jesus issued against greed and his “good news to the poor.”

For scriptural and theological reasons this parable needs reassessing. In addition to reading it as a warning that we ought to use our time, talent, and treasure for the kingdom, we ought to see it as a descriptive parable of how the economic system works for the poor. It is a descriptive parable of capitalism gone amuck. Jesus is speaking into a political/economic setting where the poor are fleeced by the powerful, often by absentee landlords, or, if you like, between the Jewish peasantry and the Roman Empire. That servant—deemed “lazy” and unfaithful by the Empire—pays an awful price for refusing to play along. In short, the third servant who buries his millions can be seen as in fact the hero of the piece.

In this reading we are asked to imagine that this is warning against those who control the political/economic life of the country. It's not a story about God as master. It is not a story about the kingdom of God at all, but about a master who is an incredibly wealthy landowner who leaves his top three employees an outrageous amount of money to take care of which he goes off on a trip. Now Jesus was talking to peasants and when he mentioned a wealthy landowner, they would have known who that person was. They would have known that Jesus was speaking about the people who owned them: their very lives, the people who had the power over laws and taxes, in short, the elite representing Rome.

So, when the wealthy man returns, the first two servants are rewarded for buying into the system of making money. The third servant is punished because he refused to buy into the system. Is he not the hero? Because he saw who the master really was and said: "I knew that you were a harsh man-here is your money back!"

In this interpretation, Jesus is giving the people an illustration of how the world operates. Sometimes we need to risk our own comfort for the greater good. We need to step against the system, not buy into it.

Perhaps the parable is asking us how we see God. Is God waiting to hit us over the head the moment we mess up? How do you and me view the God who promises to return at the unexpected time?

There was a comedy sketch by George Carlin in 1986 on stuff. The whole meaning of life he said is trying to find a place for our stuff. He talks about our house being is a pile of stuff with a cover on it. Sometimes we have to move and get a bigger house. Why, too much stuff! Too much indeed! In such a climate of consumerism and materialism it has become increasingly difficult for us to invest our time, our money and our gifts in ministry. We have become easily distracted and consumed by our consumption.

What's happening with your talent? I hope you're not buying a spade!

Amen