

Farmville Baptist Church  
 November 15, 2020  
 Matthew 25:14-30  
 "What would WE do with \$600,000?"  
 Tracy Hartman

Did you read the quote at the top of the bulletin this morning from Archibald Hunter?  
 "Parables are often instruments of controversy, used by Jesus to justify his actions, vindicate the gospel against his critics, and confront an audience with the clear and inescapable will of God." Hunter is right. If we think there is a pat and easy answer to any parable we hear, we can be quite certain that we have missed the point. The problem today is that if you read ten different commentaries, you'll find ten different answers to the question, "What is the point of this story?" As we seek to answer this question for ourselves this morning, we need to remember that Matthew is writing to first century believers who were struggling with what appeared to be a delay in Jesus' return. Matthew is instructing his readers on who they are to be and what they are to do while they are waiting. Keep this context in mind as we dig into this difficult text this morning.

Theological William Herzog suggests that Jesus told this parable to confront political and economic exploitation affecting the people of his day. He notes that Jesus talked about wealth and poverty more than any other topic except forgiveness, and that his hearers likely interpreted this story quite literally. In the Ancient Near East, as in many other times throughout history, peasant farmers or sharecroppers rented land from wealthy landowners. The landowner had overseers, often slaves themselves, who collected money from the peasant farmers who were doing everything they could to pay off their debt. What happened if you had a bad year? If there was a drought or a flood and your crops were destroyed and you couldn't pay the landowner? There was no mercy. The sharecroppers or peasant farmers were like the third slave ó from

those who had little, everything was taken away and they were cast out. Where would Jesus be in this scenario, Barbara Lundblad asks? In the outer darkness with the slave who was cast out and with the wedding guest without the proper clothes, and all the others who had previously been banished, redeeming them and restoring them.

If we're honest, this interpretation makes many of us uncomfortable. Many of us view life through the lens of American individualism and the premise of the availability of the American dream for everyone. Anyone can succeed if they have initiative and work hard enough or if they pull themselves up by their bootstraps and persevere. My parents are a great example of this, and I was largely raised on this philosophy. But, tell that to the single dad who was barely scraping by before the pandemic. Now his children are in school virtually. He can't afford childcare and he can't leave them home alone. Like a drought that ruins the crop for the peasant farmer, he is one step away from losing everything despite his hard work and perseverance. And this is not an isolated issue. The website Feeding America reports that here in VA, 1 in 10 people, almost 843,000 of us, struggle with hunger, and over a quarter million of these are children. I see Jesus standing with them and calling us to come along side them as well.

(PAUSE)

Other scholars, mostly privileged white men, approach this parable as an allegory. In this interpretation, Jesus is the wealthy landowner, the slaves are church members, the master's departure is the ascension of Jesus and his return from the journey is the second coming of Christ. The rewards and punishments the master hands out upon his return represent the final judgment. This common interpretation is simple, straight forward, and problematic in many ways.

The biggest problem I have with this view is the incredibly harsh view it paints of God and Jesus. The portrayal stands in stark contrast to who we know God to be and how we see Jesus act throughout the gospels. Think about the story of the owner of the vineyard who comes to the market place every hour throughout the day to hire more workers. At the end of the day, instead of paying each worker for the time they have worked, he pays them all a full day's wage ó it's outrageous generosity. Then there is the servant who is not punished, but rather forgiven a huge debt due his mismanagement. In light of these stories, the punishment for the third slave in today's story seems even more out of character. And what about Jesus's teachings that the last will be first and blessed are the meek and the poor in spirit? The portrayal of Jesus as the harsh landowner is at odds with much of the rest of the gospels.

I also struggle with the harsh treatment of the third slave for not producing additional wealth for his master. As we talked about on Wednesday night, the land owner handed out huge sums of money here. One talent was equal to 15-20 years of wages for the average worker in Jesus's day. Considering that life spans were much shorter than ó often only 40 years or so, one talent could have been the equivalent to a lifetime of earnings. Some suggest that one talent would average about \$600,000 in today's currency. So the slave who received five talents received \$3 million dollars and the one who received two talents received \$1.5 million. Depending on the denomination of the coins, the one talent that the third slave received could have weighed as much as 50 pounds.

I have some sympathy for the third slave who took the safe play, don't you? After all, the master leaves no instructions about what the servants are to do with the money. There are no FDIC protections or government bailouts available to him if he fails, and in the Ancient Near East, burying valuables was a common way of protecting them from thieves. Was protecting his

master's money and returning it all intact instead of multiplying it worth the harsh punishment he received? Is something else at play here? Mark Douglas thinks so, and I agree. He says, "the conventional reading of this parable meshes with and grows out of the lens of free-market capitalism, get-what-you-deserve justice, and disciplined self-improvement" and it misses the point. (PAUSE) So what might be the point then? (PAUSE)

Douglas suggests that the parable is not about the talents and what the slaves did or didn't do with them. Instead, this story about the relationship between the master and the servants and how that relationship influences the way they lived their lives. It is about how/why they spend their time while they are waiting for their master to return.

This leads to the third issue with the traditional interpretation of the parable; the servants' motivation and expectations. In the traditional interpretation, the first two servants work feverishly for a greedy boss or perhaps partly to earn their own rewards. Some scholars believe that the master freed the first two slaves who performed so admirably. The third, in this scenario, buries his talent out of fear. This interpretation leans heavily towards works righteousness, doesn't it? We shouldn't serve our master out of fear nor in hopes of a future reward. Rather, we should serve faithfully out of gratitude and obedience, and then be delighted when God gives us benefits out of grace.

Viewed this way, this story pivots on relationship and mutual trust. The master gives talents to the servants according to their ability, trusting them to make good use of the talents on his behalf or seen this way it is basic stewardship isn't it? In turn, the servants trust the master or both in the way he portions out the talents and in his reaction to their good faith efforts. Following this option, the mistake of the third servant is not in failing to trust the **market**, but in failing to trust the **master**. He operates out of fear instead of gratitude and faith. His statement,

“I knew you were a harsh man,” gives us a clue that perhaps he doesn’t know the master as well as he thinks he does. (PAUSE)

It seems then that the first two slaves knew the master better. And what was the result? The first two slaves were empowered to live boldly, to take risk on the master’s behalf. I couldn’t help but wonder this week, and we raised the question on Wednesday night, what if they had failed, what if they had lost it all? We don’t know for sure, but I have a feeling the master would not have dealt with them harshly at all.

Why? Because at this point in the gospel, Jesus is in the middle of his own high-risk faith venture. He has left the safety of Galilee and he is on the way to Jerusalem where he will challenge the religious status quo and the Roman occupiers. And by Friday night of Holy Week, the whole enterprise will look like a miserable failure, Jesus’s followers will feel like they have lost it all.

The reality here is that discipleship is a high risk venture. In fact, another way to translate the word *ōlazyō* is *ōtimidō* ó afraid to risk. And slothful can mean not caring, not living up to our full potential, or burying our talents. For many of us today, our faith is a comfort zone, a place where we find our security for the here and now and the here after. It is about getting our theology right and living a good life. But following Jesus is about much more than that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. As a member of the resistance party that helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler (which cost Bonhoeffer his life by the way), he modeled risk taking for us all.

If we read this parable differently, it starts with extraordinary generosity ó the master entrusts his slaves with wealth, power and freedom. Then the master limits his own power by

going away ó providing the distance and space needed for others to grow and learn to lead, to take chances and flourish. (PAUSE)

In just a few minutes, we will have a Town Hall meeting where we will begin to make some key decisions about the life of our church moving forward. We will need to answer, how much do we trust the master moving forward? What talents have we been entrusted with and risks might he be asking us to take with them? My prayer is that we will be found faithful and that one day, God will say to all of us, well done good and faithful servant. Amen.

Sources used for this sermon:

*Feasting on the Gospels: Theological Perspective* by Daniel Ott, *Pastoral Perspective* by Robert McClellan, *Homiletical Perspective* by Barbara Lundblad.

*Feasting on the Word: Exegetical Perspective* by Thomas Stegman, *Theological Perspective* by Mark Douglas, *Pastoral Perspective* by John Buchanan, *Homiletical Perspective* by Lindsay Armstrong

*New Interpreters Bible Commentary*

Greg Klotz, Matthew 25:14-20.