

Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

Proper 28A
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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How Will You Follow?

Well, isn't that just a perfect gospel reading for Ingathering Sunday? Be daring, be bold, double your money for the kingdom! Risk boldly, because if you don't, YOU will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! I am sorry to say that many a preacher has used this parable as a stewardship lesson, effectively turning the kingdom of heaven into a capitalist system, which it certainly is not. Yes, there are very real stewardship implications, but they aren't likely the implications that show up on the surface of this parable. Like thinking the Master is God who has entrusted us with gifts of money, personal characteristics, abilities and strengths, and demands that we invest our gifts to double our impact. Like thinking God will praise us when we double our money and berate and banish us to the outer darkness if we don't.

Yes, it can be tempting to use this parable as a stewardship lesson – especially today, as we bring the public phase of our Annual Giving Campaign to a close. But while there are stewardship implications in this parable, that isn't finally what it's about. Knowing he is soon to die, this is one of the very last stories Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel, so I have to believe what he's saying is really important. And still, I don't like this story. I sort of wish I'd taken one more Sunday off and let somebody else try to make sense of it. But no.

There are some good reasons not to like this story. There are some very disturbing aspects to it. It's hard to come away with anything other than the despair of the terrified slave who's thrown into outer darkness where there is nothing to do but weep and gnash his teeth. I don't know that brutal, punishing God. I know a welcoming, loving, forgiving God. And then there is the notion of using slavery to make moral examples – which I find horrifying. And honestly, if the kingdom of heaven is a capitalistic system where doubling your money is rewarded and opting out of the corrupt system is punished, then I'm not interested. So where is the Good News in this story?

Since we only have this Sunday and next in Matthew's gospel, I'll say one last time, how important it is to remember the context for Matthew's community. There are several aspects of their first century mediterranean life that we need to understand in order to try and make sense of this parable. There are two overarching conditions for Matthew's first century listeners that are easy to forget. The first is the Roman occupation and the exceedingly corrupt and exploitive form of government they were all living under. The "Master" in this story behaves in ways that would be most familiar to these listeners. It would have made perfect sense for a Master to

entrust his workers with large sums of money for long periods of time – that was a test of character in the ancient world. The corruption in the system allowed everybody to win, everybody except the poor day laborers on whose backs the system was built. When we hear Jesus talk about money, it's often in terms of a denarii, the equivalent wages of one day's labor. But a talent? A talent is the equivalent of 20 years' worth of wages, so the slave who was given 5 talents had in his possession the equivalent of 100 years of labor. How did people amass that kind of money? By lending money to poor farm workers at extortionate rates – as much as 200% interest – which by the way, is a practice forbidden in scripture. *“If you lend money to my people,”* God said *“if you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. Exodus 22:25* That was the law. Can you imagine the desperation of one who would take on a loan illegal in the eyes of God, a loan at such exorbitant rates, which of course, could never be repaid? So the working farmers in this agricultural society lost their land to the rich guy who loaned them the money to save it. Also implicit in this corrupt system was the expectation that investors, even slave investors, would skim money off the top of their investments, so more money for the master meant more money in the slave's pockets too.

The second overarching condition Matthew's community lived under was the very real expectation that Jesus would literally return to them at any moment. Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension occurred about 50 years before this gospel was thought to be written, so the community had been waiting a long time. They would have heard this story as one describing how to live in the “waiting times.” You've been given talents – use them for the kingdom! Sort of a first century version of the bumper sticker – “Jesus is coming, look busy!” While it doesn't actually work very well, the judgment pronounced on the third slave was supposed to somehow encourage people to use their talents until Jesus, the Master, returned. The judgment we so often encounter in Matthew – people are condemned for all eternity to the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth no fewer than six times in this gospel – is, for Matthew, the very real result of failing to turn thoughts and prayers and good intentions into concrete actions that clothe the naked, visit the sick, feed the hungry, house the homeless, serve the suffering. But this judgment-oriented gospel writer is the same one who gave us the beautiful beatitudes: Blessed are the poor in Spirit, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, Blessed are the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, the pure in heart, the peacemakers... So you see, it's complicated.

I've preached this parable in years past, and like many biblical scholars, I'd always assumed it to be a sort of metaphor – albeit a tricky one - for the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus, the Master, is profoundly generous with us, giving us boundless gifts with the expectation that we will use them for the good of the Kingdom. When we recognize God's generosity and use our God-given gifts to multiply God's grace and goodness as the first two slaves did, Jesus is pleased with us and we are rewarded with the knowledge of having taken our part in bringing God's kingdom a little closer. We make money for Jesus, we give that money to the church, and Jesus is happy with us. Yep, that's the trashy stewardship angle.

But when we are afraid, when we respond to God and to the world from a fearful place, we hide, we cling to the past or at least the present, and we avoid risk at any cost. Remember that Jesus is about to be crucified and he knows it. Perhaps what he's so desperately trying to get across is that following him is risky business. It means stepping out on a limb, taking actions that might bring unexpected consequences, letting go of what has been for the sake of what can be. That's what I've seen in the past, and it's a somewhat satisfying interpretation. Somewhat.

As it turns out, today I can't fully satisfy myself with the old metaphors. Of course I cannot conceive of the God of love as a wealthy slave master, ensconced in a greedy capitalistic system that succeeds by destroying the very people Jesus is constantly admonishing us to care for. I cannot begin to imagine a God who would give more to the exploiters and take away what little the little people have, and then throw them into the outer darkness. I can imagine that the third slave, the one who would not turn his master's money into more money, the one who would not participate in the corrupt system that continued oppressing the already oppressed, the one who saw through all the bling and the flashing talent signs. I can imagine that he is actually the one showing us the Kingdom of Heaven.

Both ways of hearing this parable have valuable lessons for us. Is one right and the other wrong? Well, that's not important and it isn't even a very good question. Whether we see the first two slaves as examples of how we should use our talents to expand and multiply the riches of God's Kingdom, or whether we see the third slave as the exemplar, the one who says no to the oppressors, the greedy, the merciless, the point remains. There is kingdom work to be done and God has given us all amazingly wonderful gifts, to be used for bringing God's kingdom to bear, rather than to benefit ourselves and those closest to us.

So don't worry. This isn't an Ingathering Sunday parable that asks you to double the pledge you've already submitted lest you end up in the outer darkness, weeping and gnashing your teeth. It's a much bigger story than that. This is a story Jesus tells when he has precious little time left with the ones who will carry on his mission in the world, a story he tells to remind his followers then, and now, that we really are supposed to give everything, or perhaps to give up everything, for the sake of bringing God's kingdom to bear. To call this a parable about money makes it far too small. This is a parable about life itself, and what it is to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. I believe with my whole heart that Jesus wants us to follow him, not just admire him. And that, my dears, is risky business. But can you think of a life any richer than a life lived risking everything for the sake of love? It's what Jesus did. And as his followers, it's what we're to do too. Amen