

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 25:14–30

Today we turn to the challenging parable of Jesus as found in the gospel of Matthew. Our text comes from the 25th chapter, one that contains three stories – the wise and foolish bridesmaids, the parable of the talents, (or coins) and the sheep and goats at the end of the age – the one where disciples ask Jesus when they have seen him hungry, etc. These stories have traditionally been considered stories of the End of the Age, when Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. And Matthew addresses a young church convinced that Jesus would return soon. There's a sense of urgency in his writing, and its often hyperbolic and surprising.

New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine¹ cautions us against searching for singular meanings to parables, reminding us that these are stories that afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. She writes that if we listen to a parable and say, “Wow, I really like that,” or fail to take any challenge from it, then we probably aren't listening well enough. She encourages us to consider what parables “do” rather than what they “mean.”

So let us pray for the wisdom of God's spirit to be made known to us now. Open our hearts, O God, to receive your word as found in scripture. Let us listen and respond as your faithful people. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer.

I will be reading from the Common English Bible today – Matthew 25: 14-30

Jesus says,

¹⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five valuable coins,^[a] and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant’s ability. Then he left on his journey.

¹⁶ “After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. ¹⁸ But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money.

¹⁹ “Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained five more.’

²¹ “His master replied, ‘Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

²² “The second servant also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained two more.’

²³ “His master replied, ‘Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

²⁴“Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’

²⁶“His master replied, ‘You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven’t sown and that I gather crops where I haven’t spread seed? ²⁷ In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. ²⁸ Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. ²⁹ Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. ³⁰ Now take the worthless servant and throw him out into the farthest darkness.’

“People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

I was pretty happy when I learned that the parable of the talents, as it is named in the New Revised Standard Version was mine to explore this week. I had warm sorts of feelings as I imagined talking about using our skills and time and treasure to honor God, relieve suffering, make the world a better place. I remembered this parable being used often in stewardship sermons of my youth. And I thought it would be wonderful to talk about poet Mary Oliver and how we are each called to live our one “wild and precious life.”

But then I read the story again, and was surprised by it. Challenged. Disturbed. I wondered – Who is God here? What’s this all about?

A familiar, traditional interpretation of the parable is an allegory like this: The master - who is God - has given us skills, attributes, talents and wealth that God expects us to use courageously and creatively to bring glory to God and make the world a better place. There are rich rewards for pleasing God and using our gifts, but if we don't, there will be punishment and displeasure of the master/God.

Matthew encourages us to show our faith with action. Of course, using our God given gifts – our time and treasure is an important part of following Jesus.

Yet the master here does not sound or act the God that we see in Jesus – one that is concerned with justice, compassion and mercy.

In this interpretation, the third servant, the one who buries his coin, is vilified – both for his fear and his boldness. When he calls out the master on his exploitation and cruelty, it is attributed to spite and slander. The master or God figure in the allegory doesn't deny it! Okay – he replies - if you knew that I was taking advantage of others and thought it was so bad, why didn't you invest the money in a bank? That seems pretty reasonable to 21st century ears, but back then bankers were more like merchants, taking money and offering very little in return. Even suggesting that the servant use a bank suggests the lengths to which this master will go to make money. (Herzog, pg. 165) ²

The first two servants were rewarded with more money and responsibility, while the third is stripped of his coin, it's given to one who already has a lot, and he throws the guy out on his ear, stripping him of his livelihood and respect.

I'm not so sure about a God who gives more wealth to those who are already wealthy and takes from those who have far less. Or a God who punishes a human for fear.

Or maybe you have always interpreted this parable as one about evangelism. Again, allegorically, God is the master, asking followers to share the good news. This reading brings up similar problems. Yes, in the final chapter of Matthew, Jesus tells the disciples to go into the world to make disciples, but are we really to believe that God wants followers by coercion and is willing to eternally punish those who do not fulfill God's wishes? Will God actually condemn us to eternal damnation because we are scared?

It just doesn't sit right. Father Richard Rohr writes that if we accept a punitive notion of God who eternally tortures those who do not love God, then we have an absurd universe where most people on this earth end up being more loving than God."

So...maybe something else is going on here.

Minister, author and blogger Debie Thomas wrestled with the same concerns I had³. She was troubled and decided to read the parable to her young adult son, who enjoyed talking about her studies, expecting him to hate it. Instead, her son responded, "That's a great passage! It sums up everything Christianity is about. I love it." Oh, she was confused! She asked him what, exactly, he loved about it. "Isn't it obvious? He replied, "I love how the 3rd slave (servant) is the hero of the story."

Well, that was new. Thomas' writing references the work of New Testament scholar William Herzog's book, *Parables as Subversive Speech* – a staple in Parables classes in seminaries.

Herzog looks anew at Jesus' parables through the cultural and economic lens of the most poor, most disenfranchised in Jesus' time, challenging us to re-think some of our long-held assumptions of these stories.

This parable is worth a second look. Here's what's going on:

The Master in the story is rich, very rich. Herzog says that it would have been clear to Jesus' listeners that this man amassed his wealth by participating in a system that took advantage of poor farmers, lending money for land and equipment at high interest. Between the high interest drought or flooding, farmers would often lose land and return to day labor...like the kind we saw in the story of the workers in the vineyard. Further, early listeners would have seen right away that this master was not following Torah law that commanded the wealthy to care for the poor, the outcast, the vulnerable, the immigrant, the widow, the orphan.

So, the master calls three of his trusted workers together. Each one has profited from the system under which they labored. They are all given lots and lots of money to play with while the boss is away. And they know that as long as they make enough for the master, they are able to keep some for themselves.

The coins in the story are talents - heavy precious metals, usually gold or silver. One talent alone would be worth 20 years wages for an average worker, so 10, 5, or 1 – all are a good bit of cash.

The first two workers do just as expected. They double, and probably then some, the money they are given. We don't know how they do it, but since they are part of a system that takes advantage of people, we can guess they did it at the expense of the poor.

By contrast, the third servant buries his talent in the ground, removing it from the system, literally keeping it from doing further harm to the poor and vulnerable.

The first two servants are praised and rewarded by their master. The third speaks up, blows the whistle on the master, calling him out on the dishonest means by which his money was earned, and up until this point, the servant has benefitted from.

The boss then sends him away where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Herzog suggests that because this person blows the whistle on the master, he loses his privileged position and all that comes with it. He becomes worthless in the eyes of the culture. Maybe the weeping and gnashing of teeth describes the man's literal life that is now cast on to margins of society, shivering in the cold, working as a day laborer, losing his house, his status.

Maybe the parable of the coins is less about the end of the age and, rather, is Jesus' commentary on the unjust economic system of his day and the potential consequences to those who take an active role in interrupting the system. Some scholars even believe Jesus' original story did not have the sentences about the servant being "cast out."

Perhaps Matthew included this teaching to prepare his listeners for the difficulty involved in being a disciple, and following Jesus' example of speaking truth to power and unmasking systems that exploit and take advantage of the most vulnerable.

This provocative story is one for our times. It's particularly relevant as we continue on our journey of antiracist discipleship, listening to the voices of people long silenced, facing the hidden history of our nation, our land, our church.

Jesus is always challenging us to go the side of the poor and vulnerable, which takes courage and conviction.

How will we stand up and proclaim, "Enough is enough," as those who have benefitted from unjust systems and structures? We have made a start in a number of ways, but one example is our Restorative Actions program, surrendering a percentage of wealth to Afro Americans and Indigenous people. We continually learn about systems and structures- from which we have benefitted – that call us to interrupt.

Following Jesus is as risky, uncomfortable, and rewarding as it ever has been. There is so much to learn, so much to do. What an adventure we are on together. I thank God for the opportunity to struggle with a community that is committed to loving neighbor as self and healing the earth.

Thanks be to God.

Sources:

¹Levine, Amy Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. Harper Collins, NY, NY, 2014.

²Herzog II, William R, *Parables As Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1994, chapter 9, “The Vulnerability of the Whistle Blower.”

³Debie Thomas: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2814-the-good-kind-of-worthless>