

“Quality vs. Quantity”

November 15, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30

Revelation 3:14-22

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Today’s Gospel lesson comes third in a series of four parables about the return of Christ. It follows directly after the parable we studied last week - the ten bridesmaids and their lamps. Listen now for God’s word for you from Matthew 25:14-30.

God bless our Monday morning Bible study.

They never fail to let me know how they truly feel about a lectionary passage.

When I first read today’s Gospel passage, I thought to myself, “Surely there is more going on here than meets the eye and the Monday morning Bible study crew will help me figure it out.” And while I was right -- the faithful members of that study *did* help me to better understand this passage, they didn’t necessarily help me to *love* this parable.

Because *they* certainly didn’t. They found a lot of issues in the parable. They took issue with the master in the story, handing out all this money with no instructions. They took issue with the master’s reaction to the third slave’s fear. And they definitely took issue with the slave being cast out into the “outer darkness” where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And I don’t blame them for taking issue. There’s a lot to unpack in this parable. Whenever we encounter parables in the wild, our first inclination is to look at the parable as an allegory -- a story with a hidden meaning in which different elements or characters within the story directly correspond to other known people or events.

One of the most famous examples of allegory is “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.” If you’re familiar with that story, you know that Aslan, the lion,

sacrifices himself to save Edmund, the petulant winner of the bad-choice award. In this story, Aslan represents Christ and Edmund, sinful humanity.

Allegory often breaks down though, when we are confronted with the parables. It can get tricky when we try to assign definite roles to the elements of Jesus's parables.

Neatly assigning Jesus, God, and humanity to each respective element of any parable can be dangerous. After all, when we look at today's parable, are we comfortable with saying that God is *absolutely, definitely* the slave-owning-master in this parable? Perhaps not. But can we find comfort in discovering aspects of the master in this parable that can apply to God also? Absolutely.

The beauty of parables is that there are a multitude of ways in which we can interpret them. We can examine the same parable in a Bible study and have different interpretations -- as we did this week in our Bible study. As individuals, we can study the same parable at different times in our lives and come to different conclusions. The Parable of the Prodigal Son can, throughout our lives, change into the Parable of the Two Sons or The Parable of the Forgiving Father.

Parables are multifaceted and change with each new perspective. Like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands, just when you think you've grasped a hold of the meaning, it can slip away.

Amy-Jill Levine, New Testament professor at Vanderbilt, says that "what makes the parables mysterious, or difficult, is that they challenge us to look into the hidden aspects of our own values, our own lives. They bring to the surface unasked questions, and they reveal the answers we have always known, but refuse to acknowledge."¹

Levine goes on to say, "Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough."²

¹ "Short Stories by Jesus" - Amy-Jill Levine; Page 3

² Ibid.

So when we hear this parable and it makes us uncomfortable, according to Dr. Levine, we are off to a great start! The hard task is asking ourselves, “What is it about this parable that really rubs me the wrong way? Where do I find myself in this parable?”

For many of us, I think it’s because in our attempts to assign roles in this parable to our own lives, we pay little attention to the first or second servants. There’s no way we’re the great investors. But we feel indignant upon hearing the fate of the third servant -- the one who hid his talent out of fear and was thus cast out.

And so I think Dr. Levine would encourage us to pay attention to that. What is it that we refuse to acknowledge about ourselves that we see laid bare in this parable?

We are indignant because we see so much of ourselves in the position of the third servant. We see the third servant, afraid of his master, and so hiding his talent in the field to protect it. And what’s so wrong with that? After all, this was a common practice in the first century. It’s akin to those scores of folks who hid their money under their mattresses after the Depression due to a distrust of banks. And a talent wasn’t chump change. A single talent at that time was equal to about 20 years’ worth of salary. When we’re talking investment, we’re talking major risk here.

I don’t blame the third servant for being overly-cautious about that kind of money. But the master certainly did.

So what was so wrong about what the third servant did?

To understand that, we need to go back and examine the master’s actions a little closer.

First of all, he gave to each according to their abilities. Of the three servants, they each got only what the master believed they could handle. Obviously the master was feeling cautious about the abilities of the third servant. This is why he gave him the equivalent of 20 years’ worth of wages and not 100 or 80, like he gave the other two.

But he *did* give him something. He obviously expected that this servant was capable of producing *something*. But what does the servant do instead? Out of fear, he buries the money in the ground, afraid to do anything with it.

The other element we need to examine is the rate of return for the first two servants. The first one receives five talents -- or 100 years' worth of wages. He invests it and receives back another five talents. Similarly, the second servant invests his 2 talents and receives back another two. Both servants receive the same rate of return -- 100%. The logical conclusion is that if the third servant had invested his one measly talent, he would have received back 100% of his investment also. And yet, he didn't.

The master rewards both of the slaves who invested in the same manner, he invites them into his joy, to feast with him in celebration of all that they have done with his help. But the third slave is completely shut out from the celebration, removed from it all.

Where is Jesus going with all of this? Where is the Good News?

Perhaps it's that what the Lord values is quality and not quantity of effort.

As one commentary notes, what the Lord values is "not one's accomplishments in a quantitative sense but the fidelity of one's commitment, as mirrored in one's whole-hearted activity.

That's what the master required of his servants -- whole-hearted activity. He expected them to invest *all* of their talents, whether they had five, two, or one to give.

And it's what the Lord requires of us today -- a whole-hearted love in which we put our all into our faith. That may sound exhausting to some of us. But remember, even the slave who had one talent, if he had invested it, would have seen a return of 100%.

What Jesus is saying is we can't let risk -- whether that be risk of failure, risk of ostracism, risk of rejection from society -- whatever the risk may be -- we can't let risk cause us to bury our God-given talents in a field somewhere. They are meant to flourish.

The point is, we have to try.

Remember, Jesus is telling this parable only to the disciples during what will be his last week on earth before the crucifixion. Jesus is the master about to go away and he's got a ragtag bunch of disciples, all with a multitude of different kinds of gifts and talents. If they bury their talent, if they let fear control them, they run the risk of this whole movement dying. Jesus promises them, "If you take what I have given you and you invest in people, you will receive back double what you had in the first place. I promise." For the disciples, the talents might represent the actual Gospel -- the Good News -- and Christ needs them to invest.

Thankfully, we know that the disciples took this parable to heart. We know that because we are here today. The church was able to grow and grow and the Word and love of God has spread to the ends of the earth because the disciples didn't let fear call the shots.

But just because we are here today doesn't mean that the parable only applied to the disciples then and that we're done with it. It doesn't mean that we don't need the reminder of this parable that God calls us also to take risks for the Gospel, that God won't let us be static in our faith or just go through the motions.

The passage from Revelation that I read earlier is a reminder to us that it's easy to fall into the habit of being passive observers in faith. The passage sits at the very end of a series of letters to seven different churches of Asia. In each of the letters, Christ, speaking through John of Patmos, addresses the specific needs of each church. Christ offers a challenge or reproach, but then also a promise. For some churches, they have some in-fighting. For others, they have conflicting theologians in their midst.

For Laodicea, their crime is that they are lukewarm. Christ says, "I know your works; you are neither hot nor cold. Therefore," Christ says, "I am about to spit you out."

It's such a strange image, but it sticks with you. Christ is saying to the church, "Stop being passive. Stop showing up but not *doing* anything. Stop being quiet when you hear others talk about me. Take risks for me. Take risks for my church. Love me or hate me, there is no middle ground."

So, what are we to do with this parable, especially when we find ourselves sympathizing with that third slave, when we find ourselves feeling inadequate about our faith or afraid to take chances for our faith for whatever reason?

Perhaps it's time to start breaking out the Christmas carols.

Now before y'all start telling me that it's not even Thanksgiving yet, I just want to let you know that I found a Christmas music station on the radio on Friday that I will now listen to from now until Christmas and also it's 2020 so anything goes at this point.

As I was saying, turning to the Christmas carols may help us figure out what to do with this parable. The hauntingly beautiful "In the Bleak Midwinter" by poet Christina Rossetti is one of my absolute favorite Christmas carols. Every time we're doing worship planning for Advent, I try to sneak it in and John always catches me.

In the song, Rossetti reflects on the night of Christ's birth. She describes the angels worshipping before him and the tenderness of Mary's embrace. Paired with Gustav Holst's musical composition, Rossetti's words offer an intimate view of that special night in Bethlehem.

But it's the final verse that always gets me.
Rossetti asks and answers,

"What can I give him, poor that I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wiseman, I would do my part.
Yet what I can I give him,
Give my heart."

That is what is required of us. A whole-hearted love that God will take and perfect and return to us 100%. It is all that easy and it is all that hard.

[Jeff sings]

All praise be to God. Amen.