

This is NOT a Stewardship Sermon

Interpreting the Parable of the Talents

Matthew 25:14-30
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
November 19, 2023

This will not be a typical Thanksgiving-themed sermon on gratitude this Sunday before this meaningful holiday. Nor, as the sermon title suggests, will it be another Stewardship sermon, even though this Gospel Reading from Matthew 25 is almost always preached as one. Many of you may be somewhat familiar with Jesus' **Parable of the Talents**. I was a bit surprised, then, when I realized I've only preached a sermon based on this biblical text twice before in the past 15 years. The previous times, not surprisingly, were indeed in the context Stewardship Emphasis Sunday, which for us was three weeks ago. For that has been the primary interpretation of this parable throughout the ages. It goes like this.

Talents (allegorically interpreted as our time, our abilities, and our financial resources) are given to us to use and generously share, to invest and multiply. This is what the first two servants in the parable did, and they were rewarded and called, "good and faithful servants", a phrase often heard at a memorial service. And the parable reflects the common biblical principle, "to whom much is given, much shall be required." But the third servant, fearful of his master, hid the talent given to him in the ground. This led to his condemnation and banishment to "the outer darkness." This common interpretation is meant to put a little scare into church members, with the message: use it or lose it. In other words, a typical stewardship sermon.

The title of my sermon from 2011 basically fits this common interpretation, "Invest your 'Talents'". Here's a quote from that sermon. "We are challenged by this parable to reflect upon what it means to invest and make full use of the time, talents, and financial resources that have been entrusted to us. Being passive and doing nothing, especially out of fear, is not to be the mark of a follower of Jesus."

I'd probably summarize that today as: **Jesus calls us to be risk-takers, to be courageous, not fearful or timid**. While I think that is basically true, and a valid interpretation of this parable, I'm going to head in a completely different direction today. Or, as pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber would state it, let's turn our head sideways and squint as we explore an alternative interpretation. First this note. **Modern biblical scholars believe that parables were never meant to be simple allegories**. Meaning: this equates to that. For example, the master in any parable always represents God. Instead, Jesus' parables were meant to be multi-layered, even complicated. They were meant to make us think, and oftentimes from more than one perspective – like putting ourselves into the role of each of the different characters in the parables.

The Parable of the Talents is a perfect example, yet it's a particularly tricky one. New Testament scholar **William Herzog II**, in his 1994 book, **Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed**, urges us to ask different questions of parables. He writes:

What if the parables of Jesus were neither theological nor moral stories, but political and economic ones? What if parables are exposing exploitation rather than revealing justification.

Herzog sees parables as a means to open up thoughtful discussions. Therefore, here's a shocking twist to the common interpretation of this parable, which was new to me. Agreeing with Herzog, **Barbara K. Lundblad** writes about this in her contribution in the *Feasting on the Gospels* commentary. She explains, "**The master of this estate is not God. He is what Jesus says he is – a wealthy landowner** with substantial property, servants, and enough money to go on a long journey. Before he leaves, he distributes talents to three of his servants. Jesus is talking about exorbitant sums of money, because one talent was worth about twenty years' salary."

A "talent" did not refer to our abilities, the way we interpret that word today, but rather was a real Roman monetary coin in Jesus' day, more valuable than any other coin. So, for example, if someone makes \$50,000 a year, one talent would be equal to \$1,000,000. Jesus was talking about the equivalent of winning the lottery. Applying an economic understanding, Herzog says these servants are given '**a first-century form of venture capital.**' Therefore, their goal is to turn a profit, not only for the owner, but also for themselves. 'Well done!' says the master to the two servants who double his money. 'I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master!'

A plain reading of the text in Jesus' day, and this is the key, is that the master would represent those who were unjust in their business practices. And no, this is not a condemnation of modern-day capitalism. The master does not care how his servants, his employees, make money for him. He just wants more. Think of unethical robber baron industrialists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, like John D. Rockefeller. In this way, the servants participate in a system that perpetuates oppression and exploitation. I'll explain why in a moment.

What about the third servant? Instead of trying to flatter his master, he is brutally honest: 'I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.' Does that equate to your understanding of the nature and character of God? It doesn't mine. Rather, writes Lundblad, "**That is exactly how a wealthy landowner operated in Jesus' day – he extracted land and produce from the poor farmers without doing any of the work himself.**" The master's next words describe the reality of life for impoverished farmers, especially those who cannot pay off their debts: "**from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away**" (v, 29). **Words about God? I think not.**

For refusing to play along with the system, the third servant is thrown into the outer darkness. If this parable is interpreted as the master representing God, then this would reflect an angry God waiting to punish overly cautious and fearful persons. Biblical commentator Libby Howe writes, "**This is a story of judgment about throwing people away.** We need to see that the ones who reject injustice and are killed for it are the same as the One who hangs on the cross." So, as Lundblad asks: **Where is Jesus in this parable? Jesus is with the one who is thrown outside.** That is where he dies – outside the city as darkness covers the whole land (Matt. 27:45). We are reminded yet again of **the cost of faithful discipleship**, of being followers of Jesus by embodying and living out his ways and teachings. In this case, ways of fairness and living by the Golden Rule. If this is a valid interpretation, Jesus places himself with the outcasts. We have seen this description of Jesus before in the Gospel of Matthew.

So, which is the “correct” interpretation? Perhaps, we can at least agree on this, Jesus’ parables are complex, multi-faceted, and many layered. They have a surplus of meaning. Yes, this parable may mean using our God-given talents to spread the gospel rather than burying it in the ground. That would be the common stewardship message. However, let us also be open to the possibility that Jesus’ parable is about real-life farmers and landowners, about money and exploitation. This understanding led to an entire Christian movement during the Industrial Revolution called the **Social Gospel**, when facing the reality of gross economic inequality. That is an important element of our ministry today. For Jesus talked about wealth and poverty more than anything else except forgiveness.

We must be careful, therefore, not to make God strictly analogous to the master in this parable, for it can lead to an understanding of an angry and punitive God, something far too many people sadly believe. Instead, most of us have come to understand that **God does *not* act like the master in this parable. God is about love, not banishment.**

Maybe, when we pray ‘Your kin-dom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10), Jesus wants us to include economics, especially when it comes to not exploiting the poor.

Aren’t parable fun?!

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Gospels Biblical Commentary

Libby Howe, “The joy of what kind of master?”, *The Christian Century*, 11-9-20.