

Scripture Reading:  
Matthew 25:14-30

### **Gift's that Keep On Giving**

Before we even begin this morning I have a question for you. I would like you to turn to the people around you and answer.

What is your picture of God?

What image of God do you hold?

Who is God to you?

or What do you think of when you think of God?

I'm considering these all the same Question.

What is the picture of God Jesus draws for us? A God who loves us so much that God cares deeply about how we treat each other. A God who loves us so much that God will come in the person of Jesus and take on our lot and our life, sharing our hopes and dreams, fears and failures. A God who wants us to know of God's love enough that God will finally die on the cross that we might have life and have it abundantly.

Our pictures of God matter. Because not only beauty, but also joy, wonder, and grace, are all in the eye of the beholder. I wondered, after reading this week's gospel text, if we might also say that anger and fear, as well as wonder and joy, are in the eye of the beholder.

As John Shedd has commented, "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are for." So also a silent Christian is safe, but that is not what Christians are for.<sup>1</sup> Each and every parable cannot speak to each and every context. This parable is often used as a stewardship parable encouraging folks to give or else they will be regret it. Although I see this as a good stewardship parable if we only focus on the third servant we miss the entire point of the story. I would rather us look at the first characteristic of God represented here. What if we looked at the graciousness and generosity of the master. Did you miss that? The amount given to the servants was very generous. Enough to live off of. Even the one who received a 'little' received a whole lot.

David Lose wrote "There are two ways to read this parable, you see, and while I'm familiar with the dominant one -- that our waiting for the master's return should be purposeful, not idle -- I was struck this time through by the reaction of the third servant. And not just his reaction, but also his motivation. He is, as he himself confesses, terrified of his master. He believes his master to be harsh, aggressive in his dealings, if not exploitative. We have no evidence at this point in the parable that the master is, in fact, this way. But the servant believes it and is afraid. And so he

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<sup>1</sup> lindy black. Sermon Nuggets

freezes. Fear will do that. As a result, he doesn't do anything with the money he has been given, terrified that if he risks it in the market place he may lose it and reap terrible consequences.

By contrast, we know nothing of the feelings of the other servants about their master or the motivation for their business dealings. We only know that they went out and multiplied what had been given them. Did they do this because they loved their master? Or did they also fear him, but were driven to succeed at any cost rather than fear and fail? Did they anticipate the generous response of their master to join him in his "joy"? Or were they simply natural-born risk-takers? We just don't know. We only know that whatever it was that the third servant saw that so terrified him did not have the same effect on the first two. They saw something different, and that changed everything."<sup>2</sup>

Gomes responded to this parable by saying "Nothing ventured nothing gained....for the servant it was nothing ventured nothing lost."<sup>3</sup> Today's readings contrast hope and fear, and abundance and scarcity, as spiritual issues that shape our personal and corporate behavior. We are asked to reflect on whether or not our actions make a difference to God. Do we somehow contribute to the quality of God's experience or is God indifferent to what happens to us and our world?

It seems to me all of our scriptures tell us what we do does matter to God, and if you don't believe that I would encourage you to notice that how we live matters to those around us, to our environment and our world. Mother Teresa encourages us to "do something beautiful for God." As we live God's mission out in the world we create God's kingdom of justice, healing, and grace through our world.

To those of us who have grown up with capitalism, a story about servants giving an accounting to their master could sound like a warning from Jesus to invest our money well, or at the very least to deposit it in the bank for interest! However, the story isn't simply about money: money is the illustration Jesus uses, but as always the meaning is much deeper than mere cash or bank balances. The setting of the parable in Matthew's Gospel helps: as Jesus nears his death, would he really be exhorting his disciples to invest their money well? We suspect he would not, so the story must be about something "more."

Bruce G. Epperly writes "the parable of the talents" contrasts hope and fear, and abundance of scarcity. Do we see the world in terms of what we lack or in terms of possibilities for growth and transformation? Often realism is mistaken for seeing life only in terms of the bottom line, or our current perception of our resources as barely adequate to support our needs. This was certainly the case in the feeding of the five thousand: the disciples rightly noted that they only had five loaves and two fish, which, of course, can't feed five thousand. But, Jesus believed in a deeper

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<sup>2</sup> Lose, David workingpreacher.org

<sup>3</sup> Black, Lindy sermon nuggets

realism, which included God's lively energy, the generosity of the crowd, and divine-human abundance hidden in apparent scarcity."<sup>4</sup>

Just as we are in the real world right now in our personal lives and in the lives of this congregation this parable challenges everyone to be prudent risk-takers. To live out of the abundance that has been given so that the kingdom of God may increase. Jesus is saying don't live with regret for neglecting life-giving possibilities as they emerge.

Epperly goes on to say "Our failure to trust God and, then, take appropriate risks shrinks the size of our world and diminishes our sense of possibility; but, despite our timidity, new possibilities are always on the horizon. In contrast to the parable's words of threat, those who fail are not cast into darkness, but are given second and third and fourth (and more) chances to turn from fear to hope, and scarcity to abundance.

Remembering we are part of the body of Christ, that interdependent community in which our joys and sorrows, successes and failures are woven together, we discover that we have everything we need to be faithful to God and live abundantly. This is good news for all of us that worry about the future. From mustard seeds come great plants, and from five loaves and two fish a multitude can be fed. Faithful realism sees more than meets the eye, and trusts that nothing, not even our failures, can separate us from the love of God."<sup>5</sup>

The phrase "Enter the joy of your master." may be the key to this passage. "What is striking in this parable is the superabundance of gifts. The table, so to speak, is overflowing. A talent is a vast sum of money and generously distributed to the servants though in different amounts. The master entrusts his wealth to his servants. Not only is he trusting them with his wealth, he does so over a long period of time. Our culture, which places so much value on things happening immediately, even instantaneously, has become unaccustomed to waiting. Yet here another gift is the gift of time, a "long time," allowing the servants to live faithfully in this superabundance. The servants already participate, in a yet incomplete fashion, in the life of their master."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus the master here cannot be interpreted as a slave-driver who demands unjust practices. This is a master who is inviting the servants into fullness of joy. Not only are they invited into it but they are invited to recognize it and to share it with all the world. Joy for this master is found in sharing, and abundance for all the world. "The obedience of trust is not a burden or a fearful endeavor but is precisely the joy of discipleship in which everything is given (the gift and the interest!)."<sup>7</sup>

What then can be said about the third servant? The judgment still appears to be very harsh.

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<sup>4</sup> [Bruce Epperly](#) is a theologian, spiritual guide, pastor, and author

<sup>5</sup> IBID

<sup>6</sup> Lange, Dirk G. Commentary on the gospel

<sup>7</sup> IBID

However, if we consider the parable as a parable of invitation, perhaps his plight takes on a different perspective. If, the master is inviting, continually inviting into superabundance, grace, and joy then the only conclusion that can be drawn is the third servant is not able to hear or accept the invitation. The third servant has not only hidden the talent, he has buried himself. The third servant is not so much condemned as he condemns himself to a place – a life – that knows not joy.

Could it be that the third servant's fear prevented him from taking the risks of a like fully lived. A life of faith following his master no matter what lie ahead. Bauckham writes, "All that God gives us is given to be risked in new ventures in God's service. Every new step in living for God is a risk." The third slave did not acknowledge or understand all that he had been given. Leo Buscaglia writes

"Your talent is God's gift to you. What you do with it is your gift back to God."<sup>8</sup>

Now, it may be that the master is indeed all the things the servant fears, his harsh response might tell us that. But the master may be reacting to the servant's characterization of him and therefore his lack of faith. I'm not sure. What I am sure of, though, is that most often what we expect -- of a given situation, event, or person usually determines our experience unless we are willing to open our eyes to new possibilities..

Lose wrote: "I have a hunch the same is true of our expectations of God. Even more, I think each of us has fairly clear, if often unspoken, expectations of God that shape our experience of God profoundly. Or, to put it another way, I think each of us carries around with us a picture of God and our experience of God rarely strays very far from that picture.

For some God is loving and kind, like a benevolent grandparent. For others God is stern and judgmental. For some God is protective, for others God is always on the verge of anger. For some God is patient and long-suffering, while for others God is impatient and dour. These pictures shape not just how we *think* about God but how we *actually experience* so many events in our day-to-day life that we connect -- often unconsciously -- to God and our life of faith."<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Long writes "For those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, they find more and more of that generosity; but for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life spent under the bed alone, quivering in endless fear."<sup>10</sup> Certainly courage, generosity and good stewardship of our resources are all part of the picture, but the big picture of Christianity is one of a transformed life, as individuals and as a church.

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<sup>8</sup> Sermon Nuggets

<sup>9</sup> Lose David.

<sup>10</sup> weekly seeds.

Is it possible that we bury our faith, our relationship with God, and even the gospel itself, or at least tuck it away in some hidden place, and just take it out on Sundays and emergency situations? Is our whole life affected, changed, transformed by living out our baptism, by responding every day to the call of the Still-speaking God?

Are our lives, and faith and work in the church transformed by the generosity of our God. Have we noticed God at work in this place over the last weeks? Have you noticed God at work in your lives. This is a call to recognize how you view God and how you then live your lives.

My prayer is that as we live, work and worship together for many years to come we will see our generous God at work. That we will step out in faith to do even more with all that we have been given so that all the world may know they are not alone, but they are gifted with talents, with love, and with grace beyond all measure.