

Pentecost 24A (11/19/2017)

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18

Psalm 90:1-8

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

**Matthew 25:14-30**

*What is the Master's business? Reflecting the painful absurdity of so much earthly economy, Jesus reveals that God's business is not business as usual, and God's economy does not replicate our own.*

The parable in our Gospel from Matthew today reminds us of the power of story. Stories are capable of speaking truth in manifold ways and in wildly different contexts. In other words, stories are living, so “if you believe that you know [the one and only] meaning of a parable,” one interpreter warns, “you know you’re mistaken.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus’ parables are especially rich with significance, and resist being confined to a single interpretation. Although we might prefer black and white, Jesus teaches in color, so often challenging our assumptions, stirring our questions, and demanding our response. And, the Parable of the Talents is no exception.

I’d rather call it the Parable of the Fearful Slave, or better yet, the Parable of the Harsh Master. After all, it’s not so much about the talents themselves – or even the first two slaves – as it is about the way that the master interacts with the third slave. The traditional interpretation of the parable treats it as an allegory of the time in which we live, that is, the time between Jesus’ resurrection and second coming. The master is Jesus, who after some delay, will finally return to take account of the productivity of each of his slaves, or followers, and evaluate our worthiness to “enter into his joy.” And, the moral of the story is clear: Jesus will come again to

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Matthews (Huey), <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/november-16-2014.html>.

judge the living and the dead, so we'd better be about his business in the interim. We should be productive with the treasures God has entrusted to us – our selves, our time, and our possessions – and invest them boldly to the glory of God. **There is risk involved in the life of faith, and the worst we can do is nothing.<sup>2</sup> So, faith means resisting the fear that immobilizes us, fear that compels us to bury God's treasure in the ground. In other words, the parable urges people of faith to step outside of our "personal comfort zone"<sup>3</sup> for the sake of the Master.**

This reading is helpful to those of us who seek to follow Christ in uncertain times. We can all benefit from a reminder that discipleship is risky and requires decisive action. More specifically, the imagery of stewardship speaks a word of encouragement to us as we strive to sustain the ministries we love with our financial resources. **"Well done, good and trustworthy slave," we hear the Master say to us when we relax our grip on the treasure God has entrusted to us and invest it in the work of the kingdom taking place at Peace, in the ministries of our synod and of our companion synod in Namibia, and in worldwide ecumenical cooperation to bring about God's justice and peace.**

However, the traditional interpretation ignores an important question: **If the Parable of the Talents is an allegory of the coming kingdom, then why is the master so unlike the God we have come to know in Jesus?** The contrast is striking. For instance, the master in the parable assigns talents to each slave "according to his ability": one receives five, one receives two, and the last receives

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Simpson Duke, as cited in Beverly A. Zink-Sawyer, [http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=11&d8d=16&d8y=2014&atom\\_id=25269](http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=11&d8d=16&d8y=2014&atom_id=25269).

<sup>3</sup> John M. Buchanan, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 312.

only one. But, God does not entrust treasures to us according to our ability, but only according to God's grace.<sup>4</sup> We don't merit that which God gives, be it material resource or aptitude, nevertheless God gives generously.

What's more, the master in the parable departs from his slaves, leaving them to their own devices. Two of them thrive thanks to their good fortune, but the third hesitates, incurring the wrath of his master in spite of the master's low expectations for him.<sup>5</sup> However, **God does not abandon us to our self-sufficiency,<sup>6</sup> but rather accompanies us even in our weakness. God comes near to us in Jesus – Emmanuel – and remains with us always, to the end of the age.<sup>7</sup>**

Finally, the master in the parable concedes that he reaps where he does not sow, and upholds a vision for the world that enriches the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable: "...to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." But, **God is not concerned with the growing abundance of a few, but with the vulnerability of widows and orphans, the exclusion of strangers, the plight of the oppressed – in short, God is concerned with the suffering of the least among us.**

For these reasons, the Parable of the Talents sounds less like the realm of God and more like the earthly realm, a system by which absentee masters extract fabulous wealth from the work of their servants, while servants struggle to make

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<sup>4</sup> See Shauna K. Hannan, [http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=11&d8d=16&d8y=2014&event\\_id=71&cycle=A&atom\\_id=28697](http://members.newproclamation.com/commentary.php?d8m=11&d8d=16&d8y=2014&event_id=71&cycle=A&atom_id=28697).

<sup>5</sup> See Matthews (Huey).

<sup>6</sup> See Hannan.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 1.23; 28:20.

ends meet, and live in fear of losing even what little they have. Jesus' parable reflects the painful absurdity of so much earthly economy. So, what does he intend for us to take from it? If multiplying value is not the venture to which God calls us, then what *is* the Master's business?

Of course, God's business is not business as usual, and God's economy does not replicate our own. **According to God's purpose, the last are first,<sup>8</sup> those who humble themselves are exalted,<sup>9</sup> and the hungry are filled with good things.<sup>10</sup> And, Jesus bids us to follow in his footsteps, taking decisive action to fulfill the vision of the kingdom that has come near in him. Even so, he doesn't evaluate his followers according to our performance, but according to his love. He doesn't reap from us what he hasn't sown, but rather "gives himself completely to us, withholding nothing,"<sup>11</sup> not even his own life.**

Dear church, this is the Master whose business we are about. Divine love and faithfulness are the treasures he entrusts to us, enabling us to see his likeness in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned.<sup>12</sup> And in response, we invest our treasures fearlessly for the sake of God's economy, and rejoice in the hope that we, together with all of God's beloved, might enter into the Master's joy.

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 19:30; 20:16.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 23:12.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 1:53.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, in Kolb and Wengert, Eds., *The Book of Concord*, 434.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 25:35-36.