

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

What is going on in this parable this morning? First of all, the talents spoken of in Jesus' parable and in Jesus day are not skills or abilities as we think of the word now. They were, actually, a measure of currency: *piles of gold coins. Bushel baskets full*, in fact. One talent of gold coins weighed roughly **seventy-five pounds**. Five talents given to the first servant, then, would have weighed roughly 375 pounds – not exactly pocket change! Some scholars calculate *one talent* to be equivalent to *20 years of wages for the common worker*. One who possessed five talents of gold or silver is comparable to being a multimillionaire by today's standards. So even the 'least' of the slaves who received one talent would have been a "millionaire," not to mention being challenged in carrying even one talent – 75 lbs. worth of gold -- all the way home by himself. The master entrusts these piles of gold with servants to spend it, invest it, and to grow it – in other words, to be good stewards of the master's wealth while he goes on a long journey. The master could have just let it all sit there in his storehouse, doing nothing, while it was gone.

So, what gets our attention in this parable, and the attention of the *first* hearers and readers, is the superabundance of the master's gifts and trust. The servants' cups are, so to speak, overflowing. The master entrusts this *enormous* wealth to his servants. Not only is he trusting them with it, he trusts them over a long period of time, allowing the servants to live securely in this super-abundance.

You will be interested to know that this parable is not a lesson on financial management; neither is it investment advice on how to grow rich. It is, in fact, a teaching about discipleship – about God's grace, our faithfulness, and "the master's joy" which we

are invited to share. It is also a teaching about how what we imagine God to be like deeply affects how we relate to God.

Like these three servants, God richly blesses us in a thousand ways regarding, as we say in our offering prayer, "ourselves, our time, and our possessions, signs of [God's] gracious love." People who have kept gratitude journals, or listed one thing they are thankful for each day, find that their "bushel baskets" of blessings are so full they can't lift them on their own. Like the servants in the parable, God has given us all of it, and asks only that we use it, spend it, invest it, grow it as if not just the money in the offering plate is blessed, but *every penny, every dollar*, our time, abilities and talents – even our very selves -- have been blessed – for so it has. All of it. God has given it *all* to us and asks only that we love and trust God enough not to sit on it, hide it, or bury it, but use it – use our very lives – in ways that bring joy and blessing to others, ways that are pleasing to God who, in God's superabundant grace, gives us everything we need from day to day...and then some.

What prompts the terror of the third servant? I mean, he's not just nervous, or even afraid, but *terrified*. So not only does he *not* go out and trade to increase the considerable amount with which he has been entrusted – approximately a million dollars; he doesn't even put it in the bank for interest (as the property owner observes), but buries it in the ground.

What's curious to me is that I've often read this parable without even questioning this servant's opinion of his boss. When he says, "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed," I have often taken that at face value, despite the fact that it

didn't seem to be shared by the other two. Perhaps because it fit with the strong, even harsh, reaction of the master to him. But I wonder if that opinion is justified.

Consider these points:

- 1) Neither of the other two servants felt such fear, even though they were entrusted with significantly more, and therefore had more to lose.
- 2) The landowner gives each of them considerable sums to invest and then comes back only "after a long time" apparently without ever checking in on them. Now that's trust!
- 3) The landowner rejoices in the stewardship of the first two servants: "Well done! Enter into the joy of your master!"
- 4) Notice that he responds to his 3rd servant's negative opinion with a question, "You knew, did you...?", calling that assessment into doubt and, perhaps, expressing his indignation at that portrayal -- which might explain his reaction, as he deals with the servant according to the servant's (mis)-characterization of him. These days, we might call that a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So are the third servant's fearful actions and tragic fate in large part a result of his distorted image of the landowner?

Perhaps that is what happened. He simply was not able to hear or accept the gift of the master's generosity and trust. Perhaps he thought he dare not risk doing *anything* in case he failed. The third servant buries not only the talent of money; he buries himself. Perhaps the third servant is not so much condemned as he condemns himself to a place -- a life -- that knows no joy.

More often than not, this parable has been read either as a warning against laziness in light of the landowner's (God's/ Christ's) eventual return, or as an appeal to be actively preparing for the day of reckoning when all accounts will be settled. But scholars wonder... they wonder if, instead, this might

be a warning about how we picture God. About how we imagine God wants to interact with us. About how we assess God's character and disposition toward us, *and others*.

Perhaps Matthew realizes that given his emphasis on the law and his encouragement to *actively* wait (not just sit and do nothing) for Christ to come again, it's a good idea to remind us about what God is actually like and, just as importantly, how our impressions of God affect us and shape our actions and attitudes on a day to day basis. Perhaps, that is, Matthew is offering a warning, a warning that, all too often, what you see is what you get.

That is, if we see God primarily as stern, even angry, and given to dispensing a terrifying and harsh justice, we will likely come to believe that everything bad in our lives or others' lives is punishment from God, who thereby meets our expectations.

Similarly, if we see God as arbitrary and capricious, that's what we experience -- a fickle and unsympathetic God, who meets *those* expectations.

But if we view God primarily in terms of grace, which is what we see in Jesus, as one who empowers and entrusts and frees as this landowner does, then we will regularly be surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. For when we come to know God as a God of love, which Jesus witnesses to over and over and over, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives, and to share it with others, rather than judging them.

How many of our people are hurting because a deficient, if not distorted, picture of God. Perhaps this parable provides us the glimpse of a different picture *before* we see and hear Jesus' love and forgiveness of his murderers as he hangs crucified. These parables are spoken by Jesus just before he is to be handed over to the religious authorities to be tried and crucified. Christ's death on the cross doesn't make it

possible for God to love and forgive us, *but demonstrates that God loves and forgives us already*. That love and forgiveness is precisely what makes it possible for him to go to the cross at all.

The God we see in Jesus is not, it turns out, “a harsh God, reaping where [God] did not sow, and gathering where [God] did not scatter seed;” rather we see a God who is always giving more than we expected or deserved, and gathering what we offer back in joy.

Be prepared, though: reconsidering one’s picture of God can be difficult, and it may take some time. One Episcopalian Bishop wrote:

It’s funny, isn’t it? That you can preach a judgmental, vengeful, and angry God and nobody will mind. But start preaching a God that is too accepting, too loving, too forgiving, too merciful, too kind ... and you’re in trouble.

(Epis. Bishop Gene Robinson)

So let’s write ourselves into the parable. If you had a million dollars, and you knew you

only had one year, one month, one week, one day, one hour to use if faithfully and *joyfully*, how would you best use? After speculating on that for a while, find a way to adopt that attitude toward your money, your spiritual gifts, your practical gifts, and begin to weave it into your life. Then comes even more blessing as Jesus says, not just when we die, but even now as we live, the beautiful words – “Well done good and faithful servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.” That joy is not referring to dying there on the spot, but entering into a thankful, joyful, and *living* relationship with the God who has been gracious and loving all along.

We will keep proclaiming what Jesus reveals: that God is a God of love, one who entrusts us with profound gifts, eager for us to make the most of them in service to others and thanksgiving to God, inviting us always to enter the joy of our Lord – not only when we die, but even as we live.

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