

The Self-fulfilling Prophecy
Matthew 25:14-30
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This morning's NT scripture reading is the 3rd of a set of 4 thematic parables from the gospel of Matthew, one of which Peter preached about last Sunday. Parables are always a bit of a puzzle; they usually present with what we think is a simple, straightforward interpretation only to discover that there are all kinds of problematic elements that pop up as we start to dig in. Some of our clues for understanding a parable involve recognizing the intended audience, the writer, and the placement in the overall text.

For this particular parable, I think it is important to note that Jesus was telling these stories just a few days prior to his arrest and execution. It was the end of his ministry, and he was speaking to his disciples privately. He was responding to their questions about what signs they would see of Jesus coming again and what the end of the age would look like. The \$10 word for this is eschatology. How does it all end? So it would seem, perhaps, that Jesus was offering some final nuggets of wisdom. "Disciples, if you don't learn anything else, for the love of God, pay attention to this."

The overall formula of this set of 4 parables appears to involve a master and a set of characters that are discerning how to spend their time while their master is away. There is also an element of some sort of final accounting or judgment. So those clues would suggest that these parables invite us to think about what discipleship means as we wait for the return of Christ. With that technical explanation in mind, I invite you to take a closer look with me at what is known as "The Parable of the Talents" in Matthew 25:14-30. Listen now for the word of the Lord:

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather

where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

This is a pretty famous parable that most of us have heard many times, particularly during stewardship season. On the surface, it seems like it is a word about talents or giftedness and how we are to use what God has given us. We could assume the standard translation which in Presbyterian-speak would sound like this: "You have the gift of XYZ, and guess what? We have a need for that, we have a committee for that, so go join XYZ committee so that you are using your talent instead of burying it in a hole." And truth be told, that is a viable interpretation and a helpful one when trying to recruit leaders in the church. If we were to stick with that interpretation, we can say our Amens now and (head to brunch) (beat the Methodists to lunch.)

But with parables, it is never that simple. When I was in seminary, I took a class on parables. When I got my first paper back, I had a note from my professor that said something like, "You have done an excellent job of giftwrapping and dressing up this Parable. Try again." I learned very quickly that parables are never as straightforward as they appear. And as we begin to wrestle with this parable, things get awkward pretty quickly.

At the outset, a parable involving a master and slaves is cringe-worthy. Historical context helps us understand that this was the basis of the type of economy they had, not an endorsement of slavery. But from the start, we are jarred with that language. If we are to assume that the master is Jesus and the slaves are the disciples, then we start reconsidering we have come to understand about Jesus as a gentle, gracious, hippie-type gets turned around.

It gets more uncomfortable when the master is portrayed as a rich, vindictive businessman. This master is then entrusting us, the slaves, with the master's possessions, but the NRSV translation doesn't really capture what's at stake here. The Greek word "talenta" which has been translated as "talents" is a unit of currency roughly equal to a 15-year salary of a day laborer. If you are one of those math people, perhaps you've already calculated that the first slave, who received 5 talents, was given the equivalent of 75 years of wages. Imagine if your boss told you to take your yearly salary, multiply by 75, and invest it in risky, high-yield assets. The master was entrusting more cash to these slaves than they would ever see in a lifetime.

It is interesting to note that the Master gave differing levels of talents to the slaves. It would seem the Master already had a sense of who would be successful and who would not. Can we infer that those to whom much is given, much is required? Maybe, we're not sure yet. We read on about the successes of the first two slaves who were given the most responsibility. The text makes it sound so easy to double one's investment, but let's be realistic. Investments are always risky, and the slaves were not in the position to pay back their master whatever they lost.

This is where I think we can empathize with the third slave a bit. Granted he's been given fewer talents than the other two so he has less to lose, but still, he's been given 15 years of wages to

invest. Burying the talent in the ground was actually considered to be a wise and prudent thing to do in that day and time and was a common practice. That certainly seems like a more appealing option than investing it, losing the money and then facing your master with nothing to show for it.

So, we read that the master returned and was very pleased with the first two slaves and their successes. But the third slave, understandably, reacted a little defensively and said, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Clearly, the third slave understood the master to be a vindictive and frightening person.

If we still understand Jesus to be the Master, does this line up with who we perceive Jesus to be? Where have we seen Jesus behaving like an unjust thief? If, in fact, this master is so harsh and unreasonable, that is all the more reason that the third slave doesn't want to make a mistake with the investment. Being cautious and prudent seems like the right course of action with such a volatile master.

But can we really assume the master is a harsh man? The first two slaves don't appear to have those misgivings. The parable is not clear about whether the master is, in fact, unfair or if the 3rd slave was just projecting his fears. And I believe that how we interpret this part of the parable has some significant implications on our understanding of who God is and our role as disciples of Jesus Christ.

So now that I've muddied the water, what do we do with this story? Does Jesus even intend for us to make the assumption that he is the master, we are the slaves and so on? If so, why does the 3rd slave receive such a harsh judgment when he acts so protectively over his master's talent? He was playing it safe, he was being cautious and sensible over his master's wealth. One can only imagine the reckless things his colleagues did to double their investments. And what if they had failed – would the master have been so pleased with the first two slaves or would they have been condemned as well? As you can see, this parable raises more and more questions not to mention that unpalatable piece in the end about outer darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth!

There is no way we can know for sure what the implications of our understanding of the Master through the eyes of this parable means for our understanding of God. And maybe that's not the point. Maybe the focal point of this parable is not on the Master's identity or behavior but on the slaves. The first two slaves were both obedient and bold; the third slave responded solely from fear. He actually named it, "I was afraid (v. 25)." Fear was the primary motivator of this guy and fear was his ultimate downfall. It was a self-fulfilling prophecy. The slave feared judgment and judgment was exactly what he received. The emotion that this parable evokes in us, this fear of investing ourselves and the fear of weeping and gnashing of teeth, is the very emotion that I believe this parable is calling us to overcome.

This is a timely parable, because we are confronted by fear daily. When fear is the foundation of political strategies and policies, when fear becomes the primary force behind where we build and tear down walls, when fear dictates our federal, household and church budgets, when fear paralyzes us from becoming who we were created to be, this parable becomes incredibly

poignant. The master has lavished resources on us and entrusted us with abundance beyond our comprehension – are we making the high-risk investments or are we playing it safe, protecting it and burying it in the ground?

I think in many ways, this is a metaphor for how we understand religion. We comprehend faith as a comfort zone. The idea of salvation evokes a sense of security, both now and in the sweet by and by. We Presbyterians are especially at risk of making our faith an intellectual pursuit rather than a physical pursuit. Pastor and writer John Buchanan, said, “Faith, we think ... is getting our personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, non-risky venture.”ⁱ

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a clergy conference in California where Mark Labberton, President at Fuller Theological Seminary, spoke with our group. He had recently published a book entitled, “The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor.” He shared with us a story that took place while he was finishing this book for publication. He was flying somewhere for business, and he brought his manuscript with him as he was still making tweaks and revisions. He was seated next to a woman on the plane who inquired about what he was working on. He gave her the title of the book, and tried to explain the content. He was feeling a bit frustrated about how all the contents of the book would come together, and at some point, the woman interrupted him with a question. She asked, “Now, I’m just trying to understand, is this a work of fiction?”ⁱⁱ

This question would prove to be a turning point for him, and it is a question that has continued to be a theme that comes up time and time again in ministry. We come here on Sundays, maybe we go to a Sunday school class or participate in some mission work. But let us ask ourselves, does the gospel hold radical, life changing truth or is it a work of fiction? Does Jesus Christ truly transform our lives or are these some nice moral stories to tell?

I can’t tell you without a shadow of doubt what this parable means, and I’ve learned to love the fluidity and paradoxical nature of the parables. I can tell you that I don’t think this parable is about hitting the stock market at the right time. I don’t think it’s solely about using your gifts, although that is certainly a component of it. I suspect that this parable is about overcoming our fears and making a high-risk, go for broke investment with what God has entrusted to us. At the telling of this parable, Jesus is mere days away from making such a grand investment in us. I picture him quivering within the confines of his human body as he is divinely preparing to make the most outrageous display of love ever known to humankind. I think Jesus is telling us in this parable that now is not the time to bet low or play it safe when the stakes are so very high.

Most of you are aware of the Strategic Planning Visioning process that has been taking place over the last year. This team has been hard at work gathering and analyzing data and praying and discerning about where God is calling First Presbyterian next. Our session has begun reviewing current states and target states, and we are moving toward creating a plan that will be revealed in the coming months. This is a time in the life of our congregation where we need to ask if all this is a work of fiction. What do we believe about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and the power of transformation in our lives? Are we living up to our potential? Are we willing to receive the talents and resources God has given us and double down in the name of the one who bet on us? Or do we play it safe and bury it in the ground?

It all boils down to what we believe. Like the self-fulfilling prophecy of the third slave, if we believe that God is distant, dated, disinterested or irrelevant, then the church becomes distant, dated, disinterested and irrelevant. But if we believe that our God is creative, vibrant, loving and engaged, then the Body of Christ, the Church, will become creative, vibrant, loving and engaged.

Friends, I don't have to tell you that our society is a mess. We are infested with injustice, selfishness, greed, sickness, hate. Infested. Right now, in this moment, God's children are groaning and crying out, and as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to respond. Is this a work of fiction? Is this the time for fear to have the last word? Perhaps this is finally the time to claim God's love as gospel truth, to expand our responsibilities to one another, to love passionately, to invest, risk and sacrifice all in the name of the one who made the ultimate sacrifice for us. Amen.

ⁱ Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol 4*. (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) p. 312.

ⁱⁱ Labberton, Mark. *The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010) p. 29.