

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
November 19, 2017
Matthew 25:14-30

In today's gospel we hear the Parable of the Talents. And it's another one in a series of disturbing stories. In the story we learn of a wealthy man who leaves his estate in the hands of 3 of his trusted servants. According to their abilities, they are given different responsibilities. And when the master returns, two are rewarded and the third punished terribly for what they have done in his absence.

Matthew's telling of this story has several troubling twists. In his version of the parable, Jesus uses money, in the form of talents, as a metaphor. Some background - one talent was worth 6,000 denarii. And one denarii was the average labourer's daily salary. So you can see that a talent was a huge amount of money. So what is Jesus suggesting by this metaphor?

In the story, two of the servants invest the talents by trading or making some kind of financial transaction, and realizing interest. Upon their master's return, they are praised and rewarded.

The third servant has hidden the talent he was given where it would be safe so he can be sure to have something to give the master when he returns. Listen again to the interchange between this

servant and the 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.’ 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.’”* And then we learn that the man is punished, the talent is taken from him and he is thrown into the outer darkness. This is the third time in recent weeks where Matthew has people punished for lack of preparedness and today, for fear of punishment.

What are we to make of this?

Many theologians interpret this parable in the following way. Jesus is the master who tasks his disciples with continuing the work he has been doing, knowing he is going to meet his death in Jerusalem. And that upon his coming again, his followers will be judged for how they have responded to the legacy he has entrusted them with.

But does this really work? When we hear the servant with the one talent describe his master, does that sound like an accurate description of Jesus? When we hear the last verse where the master has the servant who hid the talent thrown into the outer darkness, does this jive with the gospel we proclaim?

There are a lot of tensions in the gospel accounts and in Jesus' parables and it's not easy to resolve them. We'd like to know the right way to interpret them, we want the right answers. Make it simple. Make it clear. But Scripture is a living word and speaks on different levels to people at different times in their lives. And if it were simple to state the meaning and lessons behind Jesus' sometimes cryptic words, why wouldn't he have just spelled it out for his disciples and for us?

I've sat with the jarring parts in today's readings for the whole week without trying to smooth out the rough edges. And what finally struck me as a possible way through echoed in the line: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

Earlier in Matthew, in chapter 13, we heard a different parable that started: "Listen, A sower went out to sow." And in that simple farming image, we learn about the nature of God. God's nature is to

pour out love, and to sow it abundantly. And even earlier in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

So our God is indiscriminate. God’s love is for everyone. The idea of earning or deserving God’s love is a serious misconception. God’s love is unconditional. It can be challenging to imagine, believe or trust this. But Jesus says “Listen,” and either we do or we don’t.

In the parable of the sower, Matthew describes God as sowing seed with abandon. God *flings* the seed far and wide without attention to where it falls. This is not a trap or a test. It’s not only the worthy for whom the seed is given. It’s simply that God’s nature is to offer love to the far reaches of the world. Even where it seems impossible to bear fruit. God’s generous nature is God’s concern. And the reception of God’s word, God’s love is *our* concern. Yet we waste a lot of time trying to deserve and earn that which is already given and given in abundance.

So could it be that in this Parable of the Talents, Jesus is turning the ideas of earning and investing and being rewarded upside down? Is he challenging the status quo and their idea of how to enter the kingdom of God?

If we set this parable today against the overall message of the gospel, we hear the dissonance. A system where people are indebted to others, where their labour profits one in power, where they are judged and condemned for not performing is not our gospel message. Our talents, our gifts are not meant to serve those who accumulate power and wealth; that's for sure. Our gifts and talents are for the benefit of God's world.

If we are the body of Christ, the well-being of the body is all our concern. We are not here to use our gifts to benefit the part that is already doing well; we are here to take care and nurture the parts of our community that are suffering, those who are afraid, those who do not trust, and are not supported in expressing their own talents and gifts.

The world's model of economy is for some to get wealthy and for others to do without. There is an uneven distribution of resources. The Divine Economy is about abundance, sharing, giving and receiving. Not about punishment. For sure, there are consequences for one's choices; that is the result of cooperating with, or working against, the Holy Spirit. But the flow is always towards love, forgiveness and building *up* of the kingdom.

When we believe that this is God's world, and we have been given the gift of life, we enter into an economy radically different than the world's economy. In God's economy we know our life is a gift, it is meant to be shared, we feel gratitude, we are not afraid, we don't earn - we receive, and we share what we have received, labouring freely for the benefit of all. Wealth is distributed, not accumulated. Resources are shared, not hoarded. The focus is on the whole, not one select part.

Where there is constriction, fear, loss, disease, hunger, the body responds in love.

In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians that we just heard, he encourages the followers of Jesus, "Let us be sober and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live with him. There, encourage one and another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Next Saturday is our annual Christmas Fair. We can approach it as a fundraising event. Which it is. And.... we can set our sights on a different vision of what we are doing. We are using the event as an opportunity to come together and work together, encouraging each

other in developing and sharing our gifts. We can use next Saturday as an opportunity to welcome the community and show them how we are working to build the body of Christ. And we can enter into the divine exchange with all who come, giving and receiving what the Holy Spirit inspires in each moment.

The way we approach every moment of every day speaks volumes about the gospel we believe in – one that opens us up in generous and joyful ways. The one that testifies to a loving God.

The divine economy is beyond comprehension. Let us continue to grapple with the images and glimpses that speak to a world where constriction, hoarding, fear and loneliness are unnecessary.

Our work is to live the good news, trust the divine economy and live into this new reality. Where all are welcome, no one is sacrificed, and all of Creation can celebrate as One.

Amen.