

“Good Living”

WORDS of FAITH: Giving

Genesis 12:1-2 and Matthew 25:14-30

Sunday, October 15, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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Sometimes Scripture readings are pretty straight-forward, like our first reading from Genesis. The concept is clear:

Abram and Sarai were blessed by God in order to be a blessing to others. The phrase “Blessed to be a Blessing” captures the essence of our faith. We are blessed by God for a reason, for a purpose, to bless other people.

We can rephrase the concept, in terms of “giving”, our WORD of FAITH for today.

God gives us blessings, so that we can give blessings to others.

Or we could rephrase it in Christian language:

In Jesus Christ, God proclaims the Kingdom and God loves us, calling us to serve God’s kingdom and love one another.

So there is a sermon in a nutshell. We are blessed to be a blessing, we are given to give. We are loved to love. But we have another scripture reading to ponder, and it’s not as simple and clear as some.

In fact, before I read it, I want to share with you a well-known definition of a parable. **SLIDE**

At its simplest the **parable** is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.

Our parable today from Matthew 25 is vivid and strange, and I think it invites active thought.

The Parable of the Talents is set in the context with other teachings about the end times, and these teachings collectively encourage faithful and engaged living in the present, as we wait on God’s future.

Our particular parable for today has traditionally been understood that we all are given different talents—different skills, different life circumstances, and different resources, and we are called to make good use of them in our lives.

We hear of three servants, each of whom gets a different gift or talent, according to their abilities. A talent was originally sort of a monetary unit. Some historians of language believe that contemporary usage of the word talent traces back to this parable.

There are strange things about this parable:

- A talent was worth approximately 15 years of salary, so it's a huge amount of money
- It seems unlikely that a master would entrust so much to a servant
- Financial advisors may wonder about this parable, noting that doubling one's money isn't easy to do
- And strangest of all, and most troubling of all is the ending of the parable, with the third servant.

Listen for God's word.

“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 one of those parables I wish I could revise the ending. Maybe we just stop after the first two servants. They multiply their talents and everyone is happy. They are good stewards.

It's an easy message: we are given talents and expected to make good use of them. The end. Amen. Time for the Packers game.

But the Parable of the Talents doesn't end nice and neat and tidy.

We have this third servant, who is fearful and cautious, and the master, who had previously seemed to be generous and insightful, who all of a sudden ruthlessly casts this cautious servant out for punishment.

This parable is one of several teachings in the Bible that we need to hear in context with the rest of Scriptures. Standing alone, the Parable of the Talents doesn't sound so inspiring.

In the rest of Matthew, we hear of a God who is blessing the poor in spirit and the meek, a God who is feeding the hungry and healing the sick, a God who calls people to new life, and God of love.

God is seen as loving, forgiving, and kind, especially with those who are poor or exploited.

So we'd think the parable might end differently, perhaps with the third servant at least trying to do something with the talent, and even if he failed, the master would be appreciative and giving him a second chance.

But the parable ends instead with weeping and gnashing of teeth.

One way to see the ending of this parable is as a cautionary tale about assuming the worst in others. The negative assumptions between the master and the third servant lead them into acrimony.

When we assume the worst about someone, it can cause problems.

The third slave somehow assumes that the master is harsh and exploitative, when we don't really see that in the text. He shares his talents with the slaves and blesses the first two servants for their work.

And the master assumes the worst about the third servant, thinking him to be wicked and lazy. Actually, burying treasure was a common practice and you

could make an argument that the slave was being cautious with what wasn't his. He didn't steal it and he returned it all.

What seemed to motivate the third slave was fear. For some reason he was afraid, and this leads to his downfall. Sort of a self-fulfilling prophecy. He was afraid, and this led to fearful, cautious behavior.

Mark Douglas at Columbia Seminary writes:

The emotion that drives the third slave creates the conditions that lead to his downfall: fearing his master, that which he fears is realized. Perhaps, for Matthew, the God we face is the one we imagined.

(From Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol 4, page 312)

If instead the servant had believed the master to be kind and generous, giving to many according to their abilities, he might have lived into that vision instead.

So the text seems to not only be inviting us to think about being faithful stewards of whatever has been entrusted to our care, but also asking us what we believe about God.

Are you afraid of God being capricious and judgmental? Do you fear God's wrath?

If so, I invite you to dig deeper into the faith, and recognize that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God so loves the world that he gave his only son, so that the world could be saved. Jesus came that we might have life—life in all its fullness, life in abundance.

If you are afraid of God, or of life, or even of death, I invite you to hear one of the most consistent messages of Scripture: do not be afraid.

"God whose giving knows no ending" is the song we'll sing later. God gives us life, and love, and possibilities every day to make a difference.

God gives with the hope that we would learn to live, to give, to love.

Poet Mary Oliver asks the big question:

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

God gives us life, with the hope that we'll learn good living.

I want to tell you my own parable about three people, three people who have been motivated by faith to good living, to being good stewards of what has been entrusted to them.

I call this the Parable of Good Living.

Thomas Andrew has been a medical examiner in New Hampshire. In the past few years, he has been dismayed by the number of deaths from opioids and from other senseless deaths.

After years of doing 30 years of autopsies, he decided at age 60 that he wanted to help prevent so many deaths of young people.

So he has left the security of his job and embarked on ministry with the United Methodist Church.

His hope is to reach out to young people through the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, to help them make good living a priority.



https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/07/us/drug-overdose-medical-examiner.html?_r=0

Obviously, this is not something that everyone could do, but here is someone using his particular God-given gifts and his life experience to make a difference. Good living. Giving.



Another example is a woman I heard about years ago and I can't forget her.

Oseola McCarty is her name, and in 1995, after a simple and hard life as a washerwoman in Mississippi. She had a fifth grade education and she walked a mile to the grocery store and never owned a car. She was a faithful church member hearing the good news of God's love, she gave \$150,000 to help support scholarships for

African American students at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Her charity inspired countless others, to both generosity and frugality. This simple faithful Christian woman worked hard and gave what she had to help others.

Good living involves giving.

So that's two people in the parable. I said there were three.

You can be the third, and you can write your own ending to the Parable of Good Living.

Let us pray....