

A Convicting Parable

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November 15, 2020. Guest Pastor Karen Scherer preaches on the Parable of the Talents from Matthew 25.

Readings: [1 Thessalonians 5:1-11](#), [Matthew 25:14-30](#)

*** Transcript ***

Okay, would you all please pray with me? Holy and loving God, we pray open our hearts and our minds this day to receive your word and free us. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

Well I've got the sunlight coming in on me now. I was thinking it was going to be overcast, but I'm going to be sort of like Moses. I'm going to shine so much you may not be able to see me. But I hope that you will hear my word today, the word that I have gleaned from our lesson today.

I'm going to go back today to the beginning. In the beginning, God's ruah, God's spirit, God's creating breath, hovered over the waters of chaos. And God spoke creation and order. Heavenly bodies above, and stars and suns and moons and planets and bodies of earth and water below, were formed and separated. And God said, "It's good." And then God spoke, and systems of life and creatures flowed from the earth. Things that fly and walk and slither and crawl, things that grow and sustain the earth. And God said, "It is good." Then God created human beings out of the earth. In God's image God created them, with the same spirit of God, the ability to imagine and create and love. And God gave them responsibility to look after and care for the earth and its systems. And God even gave them instructions. And God laughed with delight and said, "They are good."

What a mess we have made, of ourselves and of God's good creation. Such a mess. But God chose — rather than to wipe us out and just start over — God chose to come among us, Emmanuel, to be with us, to save us and recreate us in God's image, again. And God has chosen to do that, we know, through Jesus, God's son, Emmanuel. This I believe.

And I believe that this parable God speaks to us today through Jesus, through Matthew, is about just that: about how far we have fallen, how far we have twisted our purpose for being, how far we are from the human beings God created us to be, and the consequences of that. You know, for 50 years I was taught that this parable — of the talents as we call it — was about using our talents and money in service to our master, which was always defined as God or Jesus or the church. And that it was about being good stewards, much as Jesse related to us today.

But I always felt quite uncomfortable with the twist at the end, of the master being as harsh and greedy and cruel as the fearful third slave said he was. Because truly it turns out he is just that. When he takes away what the man had saved, and now returns to him and then gives it to the one manager who really doesn't need it. And the master calls the third slave wicked and lazy and worthless, and commands he be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Did that not make you a little uncomfortable? A little uncomfortable, as you heard this parable read today? And the use of the language of "master" and "slave" — and I know that that was pretty normal in Jesus' day, but has a very different ring to us today — but the use of that language just adds deeply to my conclusion, of rejection of this parable as one about the traditional form of stewardship

interpretation. I believe that this parable is not really about stewardship in the traditional way of thinking, but that it is about how thoroughly messed up we have become in this world of haves and have-nots, and about how badly we have betrayed the goodness of who we were created to be.

So let me try to explain, try to unpack this for you if I can, give you a little bit of background. I'm sure that you've heard that talents were not coins like pennies and quarters and half dollars. But talents were hefty, precious metals like gold and silver, that weighed 80 to 100 pounds, and that a single talent was worth approximately 20 years of an ordinary laborer's wage — a staggering amount of money to Jesus' peasant audience. How did the elite of that time amass that kind of wealth? They lent money to the farming poor at exorbitant interest — which by the way was against Jewish laws on usury. And they systematically stripped those debtors of their land, and they did it this way: often the people who took such loans, at rates between 60% to 200% sometimes, did so out of desperation — the people who took out these loans — putting their fields up as collateral and in last-ditch efforts to save their livelihoods. Inevitably their efforts would fail. Drought, illness, too little crop yield, and then foreclosure was not far behind. The poor man would have no choice but to surrender his ancestral land, and watch as the wealthy elites repurposed his field for profit. And then the poor man joined the multitudes of landless day laborers, who couldn't know from day to day where their bread would come from.

This is the situation Jesus describes in the parable of the talents, I believe. The three slaves in the story are the wealthy masters, retainers, or household bureaucrats — essentially the middlemen who oversee the land and the workers, collect the debts, and keep the profits coming while the master travels away on business or goes to rest at his seaside home in maybe Caesarea. And it is understood by everyone involved that the slaves are free to make a little interest on the side, these middlemen, by charging the farmers additional fees or interest. They can do this as long as they keep the money flowing for their master. So, of course the name of the game is exploitation, and no questions asked. And the only rule is a turn of profit. Turn as huge a profit as possible.

And two of the slaves do exactly that. They do as they're told: they take their talents out into the world and double them on the backs of the poor. When the master returns and sees what they've accomplished on his behalf, he's thrilled. He invites the two enterprising slaves to enter into his joy — the joy of further wealth, further profit, further exploitation. But the third slave? The third slave in this story carries out the Jewish law. He buries the heavy talent in the earth. He hides it, literally taking it out of circulation, putting it where it will do no further harm to the poor. He was being faithful to the law, to the instructions if you will, that God had given God's people. And he did this knowing full well what it will cost him. The slave, afraid yet faithful, speaks truth to the master, speaks truth to power. "I knew that you were a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed." In Greek, the phrase "a hard man" means one whose eyes and heart, mouth and ears and hands and feet, are rigid, non-functioning, and arrogantly inhumane. "I knew that you were a hard man."

By acting and speaking the truth, this third slave refuses to participate in a messed-up system that goes against God's will for human beings. And for doing so he is deeply shamed by the master and the others, and is fired, thrown out. And without a job, without land, he's as good as dead, thrown into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. I sort of wondered, could this anticipate in fact what will happen to Jesus? Because this comes just before his suffering, his arrest, his crucifixion.

I believe this is a convicting parable about how far we have fallen, how far we have twisted our purpose for being, how far we are from the human beings God created us to be. Yet there is an urgency of hope embedded in the placement and the timing of this parable. For you see, I believe it is an antithesis to the parable that Jesus tells that follows, that you will encounter next week on Christ the

King Sunday, the parable of when the Son of Man comes. And it is, yes, a parable of judgment — but a parable of mercy as well. We often hear it called sheep and goats, the parable of the sheep and goats. This parable leads into that parable. This is how messed up we are. "But when the Son of Man comes." Pay attention to these parables. Pay attention to what Pastor Meagan will tell you next week.

This was a time of urgency for Jesus. As he faced his arrest and coming crucifixion, he speaks truth to power, the power that we have that has messed up things. This is a time of urgency for Jesus. It is a time of urgency for us as well to hear this word. But I say to you friends, know this: Jesus Christ — Son of God, Son of Man, Emmanuel — is God with us. Is with you. For he entered into our messiness, spoke truth to our twisted power, interrupted business as usual for the sake of justice and mercy, suffered rejection, impoverishment, loneliness, and crucifixion, to bring us back to God and to begin God's new creation.

It is through baptism into his life, death, and resurrection that we are being created in God's image again. And it is through the lens of the Son that God sees our goodness still. Through God's living word the Spirit is working, you see, to soften our hard hearts. The Spirit is working to open our blind eyes and see what we have become, and what we are to be. The Spirit is working to open our deaf ears to hear God's word, and to open our clenched fists so that we might be open to neighbor, to our siblings, that we might care for one another and be knit together as one humanity. And that we might care for the earth again as we are meant to do, as we are meant to be for the earth: its caretakers.

So friends in Christ, hear the words of Paul, put on the breastplate of faith and love — and for a helmet, the hope of salvation that God is healing this world, has healed it through Christ Jesus. For God has destined us, Paul writes, 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. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

And may the peace of Christ, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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