

Proper 28A 2020 Sermon

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, “[The kingdom of heaven] 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.’”

Perhaps John Calvin was right. That leader of the Protestant Reformation taught that all men must work, even the rich, because to work is the will of God. According to German sociologist and economist Max Weber, Calvin’s “Protestant work ethic” developed into the economic system we know as Capitalism.¹

And isn’t that what our Gospel parable is about? Obeying the laws of Capitalism, the system of this world? The first two slaves in the parable were enterprising and hard-working, and therefore earned their Master’s approval and reward. The last slave was a lazy bum, so he got what lazy people deserve.

But there’s a problem in using this parable to bolster Calvin’s Protestant work ethic and our subsequent Capitalism: *something* in the parable doesn’t quite fit.

You see, according to the *third* slave in the parable, the Master doesn't *practice* the work ethic he seems to *preach*! The third slave tells his Master, "I knew that you were a *hard* 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." If the Master *commends* the **first** two slaves for working hard and doubling his money, why does the Master *himself* reap where he did not sow, and gather where he did not scatter seed? Is he unscrupulous? And yet, who does Jesus mean this Master in the parable to be, if not God?

The pieces of this parabolic puzzle don't all seem to fit together.

Now, the goal of a jigsaw puzzle is to put the pieces together so that the end product looks exactly like the picture on the top of the box the pieces came in.

The fact that we can't seem to put the pieces of this parable's puzzle together to form the picture **we** see on the top of Life's puzzle box *may* mean that we have the wrong top to the puzzle box, with the wrong picture on it! You see, I think we all tend to *assume* that the pieces of Life's puzzle, which God gave us, came out of a box with the picture of *this* world on the top, a picture which reflects this world's values, standards, and patterns. But in this parable, Jesus is not talking about *this* world; he is talking, once again, about the kingdom of heaven; and the picture on the box that goes along with the puzzle pieces of the Life **God** has given us is a picture of the kingdom of *heaven*. So, if we are trying to put together the pieces of the Life God has given us, we have to be looking at the right puzzle box top – the box-top with the picture of the kingdom of heaven on it (as described in the Beatitudes), *not* the box-top with the picture reflecting the values, behaviors, and goals of *this* world and its masters.

Jesus begins his parable: "For [the kingdom of heaven] is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them..." But a more *literal* translation of that verse would read: "For [the kingdom of heaven] is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and *handed over to them his existence*." The Master *hands over* to his slaves his life, his existence, his very self!

Now, what kind of man, do you suppose, *hands over his very existence, his very self*, to his slaves? A hard man? A man who reaps where he does not sow, gathers where he did not scatter seed? A miserly, tightfisted, grudging man? A Scrooge?

I don't think so; and yet this is the picture the third slave in our parable has of his Master and the kingdom over which his Master rules. This slave believes that his Master is ruthless and his kingdom is dangerous, so it is best to be as safe and cautious as possible, and not take any risks by sharing the Master's life with anyone else.

This third slave has the wrong puzzle box top. He is trying to put the pieces of life together to form a picture of the kingdom of *this* world, while the pieces his Master has given him actually go together to form a picture of the kingdom of *heaven*. This third slave sees God as hard and ruthless and punitive, and he lives his life according to this distorted picture of God and God's kingdom. He is afraid of this imagined god, and sees God's kingdom as a dangerous and threatening place. He likely believes that everything bad that happens in his life is punishment from God. He lives in fear, and it is this fear that motivates him to bury his talent.

Now, there seems to be a law in life that "what you see is what you get." The puzzle box top that you look at will determine how you put the pieces of your life together. The third slave sees a hard and punitive god ruling over a threatening kingdom, and that distorted vision of God and God's kingdom becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. How we see is how we live. Therefore, it is of crucial importance that we see God and God's kingdom as they truly are. And for us Christians, the person Jesus and the way he lived reveals the *true* nature of God and God's kingdom. If we see God through the eyes of Jesus, we see a God of love and "grace, a God who empowers and entrusts and frees... [and] we will regularly be surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. For when we [picture] God [as] a God of love, we find it far easier to **experience** God's love in our own lives and to share it with others."²

So the first message of this parable, I would suggest, is, "What you see is what you get." When we are trying to put together the pieces of our lives, we had better have the right puzzle box top, the one with the picture of the True God and the kingdom of heaven on it, not the one with the picture of *this* world and **its** masters on it.

Which brings up the *second* message of our parable, which is this: The *laws* of the kingdom of God are very different from the laws of the kingdom of this world. And yet we live out our lives so **steeped** in *this* world and its culture, its customs, its masters, that a large majority of the time we think that the rules of **this** world are the only ones that exist! Everyone must look out for themselves and their own benefit, because no one else will. Everyone is in competition with everyone else – me, *my* company, *my* ethnic group, *my* country, *my* political party, *my* religion against you and your **competing** company, ethnic group, country, political party, religion, etc. Even the law courts of our nation are based on what is called an "adversarial system." And this "us vs. them" mentality breeds suspicion and fear, like the fear the third slave in the parable is feeling. And so we buy insurance policies and extended warranties and lock our houses and install security systems and build fences and walls and arm ourselves for protection. All because the picture on the puzzle box top we are trying to copy is a picture of a precarious, competitive, threatening kingdom.

But St. John tells us, in his First Letter, that “God is love,” and that “perfect love casts out fear.” (1 John 4:8, 16, 18) And we all know that love is a currency that works by a very different set of rules than the currencies of this world and the rules of Capitalism. When we give *this* world’s treasures away, we have less of them; but when we give away *love* or give away God’s Spirit (which, as our parable states, God has handed over to us), we have **more** love and **more** Spirit! *That’s* the law of the spirit-kingdom, and it is as immutable as the law of gravity. Giving away Spirit and love, as our parable states, *doubles* them; and *more* of God’s love and Spirit then flow **into** those who let love and Spirit flow freely **out**. *This* is the process our parable calls “entering into the joy of the master.”

But if, on the other hand, we *bury* the love and the Spirit and the divine Self God has so freely given to us, if we do not allow them to flow into us and out of us, they begin to die. John Shea puts it this way: “One talent buried is not one talent saved. It is one talent lost.”³ And it is this loss of Spirit and love and divine existence that is *experienced* as being “thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” I don’t for a moment believe that God *wants* this to happen; I think it is simply the natural result of having buried God’s love and Spirit and divine Self which God has freely and sacrificially given us. As Richard Rohr is fond of saying, “We are punished **by** our sins, not **for** them.”

So here is the question I think this parable asks us: “Which puzzle box top are we looking at and are therefore patterning our lives upon? The puzzle box top with the picture of the One, True and Loving God and the kingdom of heaven? Or the puzzle box top with the picture of *this* world and **its** culture and laws and adversarial system, ruled by a hard, selfish, unforgiving god of our own imagining? It is crucial that we know the answer to this question, for in a very real sense, what we see **is** what we get. The two pictures on the two puzzle box tops depict two different kingdoms, ruled by very different masters. And as Jesus himself said, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.” (Matthew 6:24)

The spiritual law of multiplication means that when we give away the divine gift of God’s Self, it is multiplied, and we “enter the joy of the master.” But if we try to hoard or bury the divine gift of God’s Spirit, God’s very Self, it is lost. A talent buried is not a talent saved; it is a talent lost.

Next Sunday is the last Sunday of the Church Year, and we always celebrate that day as “Christ the King” Sunday. So I would suggest to you that perhaps this week you might ponder the question: Which king, which master do I serve? Which puzzle box top am I patterning my life upon?

AMEN

- 1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant_work_ethic
- 2 David Lose, *In the Meantime*, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-24-a-wysiwig/>
- 3 John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 322