

Sermon for November 15, 2020
 Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
 The Rev. Elizabeth W. Colton

For sure, there are signs of ending. Daylight Savings time has arrived, the days are getting shorter and shorter, and some of us are going to work in the dark and coming home in the dark, feeling like moles who don't get enough sunlight. This year's "Indian Summer" has been sheer delight, but it is ending. Next Sunday is the ending of the church year as well as our journey with Matthew's Jesus. So, it shouldn't be a surprise that the tone of our lessons is sharper, and that we are reading parables of judgement, because in Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells this parable in the last week of his life. He is clearly preparing the disciples to be without him. These are important last teachings.

And now, a little about talents. The word "talent" has nothing to do with our English word talent, in that it does not refer to skill or giftedness. A talent is a measure of weight, and it is thought that one talent might be somewhere between 76 and 95 **pounds** of silver. Let me say that again – between 76 and 95 **pounds** of silver. So one talent is about twenty year's work at thirty thousand modern dollars a year, or a total of about six hundred thousand. Any way you calculate it, one talent is a whopping great amount of money.

To make this a bit more vivid, you might think in these terms: in the end, the first slave who was given five talents got around three million! The one who was given ten talents got about six million. "One talent" sounds like a small amount, but it's just the opposite, it is an amazing amount, so much so that Jesus' listeners (had their attention been wandering) would have tuned in very quickly! It got your attention too, didn't it! And most important, each slave, we are told, was given "according to his ability."

Parables can be difficult. You can mine a parable for many levels of meaning, and this parable is no exception. The word parable literally means to throw alongside. It's a *side by side* kind of story that does not claim direct parallels. If we try to figure this one out, looking for appropriate parallels, we run into trouble. The general point, however, is clear: it is probably about what the disciples are meant to be doing until Jesus comes again. The master in the parable is leaving, and putting trusted slaves in charge, just as Jesus is about to leave, and preparing the disciples to be in charge of the spreading of the Reign of God..

And this is where it gets difficult. Because now we have to discern what the parable is really about. Is it about investing? A trustworthy slave's only way of making money would have been to collect rents and tributes owed his master. So how could he have possibly doubled the money without rampant exploitation? There are strong prohibitions in the Torah about charging interest on loans made to the poor or vulnerable. "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them," it says in Exodus. And then there is the extravagant complimenting and rewarding of the slaves who doubled the money.¹ It just doesn't work. The parable can't be about successful investing.

¹ Exodus 22: 25-27 If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; ²for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate. Also Leviticus 25

Here's another challenge: at first glance, it might seem that the landowner should be God. But is it your God who chastises the last slave mercilessly and orders him thrown into outer darkness? We've been reading Matthew all year: is this the picture you have gotten of God? Or have you instead come to understand that Jesus came into the world to show what God, the un-seeable and incomprehensible, is like? Have you not come to understand that God is love, evidenced in Jesus' enfolding and inclusive ministry? If that is so, this landowner cannot possibly be God.

So, we have to realize that in this parable, some parallels seem obvious, and others might be partial, or even irrelevant. So what **is** obvious? That which has grabbed our attention, the money, of course, once we understood its spectacular value! But what if this is all wrong?

Let's reconsider. The context may have some clues. Jesus is talking to his disciples. He has left the temple, and the disciples have approached him privately with questions. They want to know what the signs of the end of the age will be. Jesus begins to teach. So who is listening? Just the disciples: fishermen, a tax collector, and the other disciples. We know the names of the others, but not much else. It might be safe to assume they were not wealthy, professional people. Regardless, all would have understood the way society worked. Most people made their living from the water, as fishermen or in small businesses that supported fishermen. Others would have been tenant farmers, working for someone else on someone else's land. They would have owed a part of the harvest in return for their very living. This was the disciples' world.

Everyone listening would have been more than ready to sneer and jeer at the enterprising slaves who squeezed their tenants for more, so that they might benefit themselves. How else could they have doubled the money? These crooked slaves would not have been admired by Jesus's listeners! They would have been the objects of derision.

And there is the trap of the parable. We are quick to admire those who doubled the great amount of money they were given, and our impressions are reinforced by the master's compliments and even more rewards. But wait, what is being admired? The ruthlessness of the slaves? The values of the master who is a harsh man, who reaps what he did not sow and gathers up what he did not sow? ² In other words, is admiration owed to a man who benefits greatly on the backs of others, having done practically no work himself to earn this reward? Are we being tempted to admire outright oppression?

So . . . what if the hero of the story is the pitiful slave who buried the treasure and had no interest to report? In first century terms, he behaved responsibly. He dug a large hole in the ground and buried his eighty-five pounds of silver. He likely did it in the dark of night so no one watched, and so he could be sure of its safety. He valued and preserved the great gift he had been given.

We can't be dazzled by the money. Rather, we must remember that Jesus was always on the side of the underdog. No state in life was too humble to have one's true identity as a child of God be celebrated, a hearer of the Good News: that God is love.

This is indeed a parable of judgement, but we are in trouble if we take it at face value. Rather we should ask ourselves what evil the last slave has done. In fact, he has done no evil, and Jesus would never have thrown him away into outer darkness. This humble slave has guarded

² Matthew 25:24

and cherished what he was given, according to his abilities. Jesus may well be asking us to open our eyes more fully, to see all of God's people, not just the flashy ones who grab our attention, and who may be terrible role models. He may be pointing out that at the final judgement we shall have to account for our actions. Unfair business practices will have their consequences.

Next week's gospel, ending our journey with Matthew, will celebrate Christ the King by telling of the Final Judgement. Jesus will explain to his disciples that faithful action for the least among us, whether hungry, in need of clothing, poor, imprisoned, or even strangers; that action is as if we performed it for Jesus himself. Today's parable is preparation for that Gospel, that view of the end times. May we continue to learn that the shiniest object is not the most important. May we all be prepared, with sufficient oil in our lamps, ready for action, and with a clear understanding of the way of love, connecting all of humankind as God's very own.