

The Gift

15 November 2020 – Pentecost 24

This parable is one I despise. It fills me with tremendous anger whenever I read it. And although I am grateful it is a parable, in other words, an illustration, it makes me furious.

The parable of the talents is often used for Stewardship Sunday illustrations on the significance of giving all you can. It is also used as a way to illustrate the “prosperity gospel” whereby those who have much deserve more, and those who have little deserve nothing.

Infuriating. Let's take a closer look.

For the slaves given five and two talents we hear “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.” (*Matthew 25.21, NRSV*) That sounds quite reasonable. They have done well, they shall be rewarded.

But what happens with the servant given one talent? The landowner's reaction is to fly into a fit of rage. “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.” “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (*Matthew 25.26-29, NRSV*)

Recently, I heard a similar story to this one, if you will, it's a different take on the parable of the talents.

There was a wise king who had three daughters. He was to leave them to take a trip which would last a year. Before he left he called his daughters together and gave each of them a grain of rice. He instructed them to take care of the rice as he would want to see what they did with it upon his return.

The eldest daughter threw the rice away, thinking it a complete waste of time.
The second daughter wrapped in a golden thread and put it in a bell jar where she could see it every day, reflecting in the sunlight.
The youngest daughter took the grain of rice and planted it.

A year later the king arrived home. The three daughters greeted him with hugs and kisses, grateful he had returned safely.

The eldest daughter ran to the kitchen and grabbed a single grain of rice. She handed it to him, proclaiming it was the same grain of rice he had given to her before his departure. He smiled and placed it on the windowsill.

The second daughter ran to her room and proudly showed her father the bell jar with the grain of rice wrapped in golden thread, glinting in the sunlight. She told him she gazed

at it every day to remind her of her beloved father. He smiled and placed it on the windowsill.

The youngest daughter stood with her head down and her hands clasped in front of her. She told her father she did not have the original grain of rice. She had nothing for him to place on the windowsill. She told her father that she did not have the original grain of rice as she had planted it. Her father asked what had happened to it. She brought him to the window and showed him that the rice had grown and reproduced, now filling a field with enough rice to feed the entire kingdom. He was overcome with joy at the ingenuity of the youngest daughter.

The king decided, right then and there, that his youngest daughter would be the one to inherit the kingdom as he knew she would be a good and capable leader and she would provide for her people.

This story was first told in the Sixth Century. It is essentially the same as the parable of the talents, but doesn't leave such a hateful taste in one's mouth.

Why is that?

In the parable of the talents, the landowner is drawn as someone who could be quite cruel. The slave given the single talent is terrified of the landowner and so he buries the talent, for fear of losing it. He even finds the strength to tell the landowner that he reaped where he didn't sow and harvested where he hadn't planted. In other words, this slave found the landowner to profit from the work of others.

The landowner further says "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." (*Matthew 25.29-30, NRSV*) This is the worst part, for me, that the parable is written that most consider the landowner to represent God. A vengeful, angry, petty God who punishes the poor and rewards the wealthy. No thank you. That is not how I see God.

The second story draws the king as a kind and fair man. He knows the eldest and middle daughter don't completely understand the assignment. And they aren't punished. He smiles at their offering and places it on the windowsill.

The youngest daughter has astonished him with her ingenuity in growing all that rice, enough to feed the kingdom. She bathes in her father's favour.

The slave who invested the 5 talents into 10 talents receives his master's favour and is given more responsibility. That, alone, is understandable and honourable.

It's the punishment of the "lazy" slave that has bothered me. Why does he have to be punished when he is drawn as someone who is frightened, not lazy. In fact, it would take much more time and energy to dig a hole to bury the talent than it would to take it to the bankers and invest it.

For me, it comes down to how God is drawn.

The Hebrew Scriptures are filled with angry and violent images of God. Consider God's reaction to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They are told not to eat a certain fruit or they will die. Of course, because they have free will, they decide to eat the fruit. And they do not die. As the serpent told them, they will know what God knows. And God's punishment is not to kill them, but to send them into the outer darkness.

God gets angry with humanity and instructs Noah to build an ark. Noah is not a shipbuilder or a carpenter, but he heeds God's instruction and builds the ark. Only those on the ark, Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives as well as a menagerie of animals, reptiles and birds survive the flood.

God tests Abraham repeatedly, the most horrifying, when he is told to take Isaac, his second-born child, his first child with Sarah, to be offered as a sacrifice on Mt. Moriah. Abraham takes the child, builds an altar, binds Isaac, and is prepared to sacrifice him when a messenger intervenes and a ram is used instead.

Before we get to the Crucifixion of Jesus, God tests humanity repeatedly, and in nearly every case, humanity is found wanting.

God's last test is in giving the life of Jesus, as final payment for the degradation of humanity. After Jesus' resurrection, the focus shifts from God as punisher to God as parent and teacher. It is the God of courage and strength; of kindness and sacrifice; of hope and humility that I worship.

Not the God of punishment for several generations, the God of judgment and persecution. The God of reason and love is the God I worship.

Some of us may see ourselves as the eldest daughter in our faith journey.
Some of us may see ourselves as the middle daughter in our faith journey.
Some of us may be fortunate enough to have the gumption of the youngest daughter.

Regardless of which daughter you identify, you have found favour with God.

We are all at different stages on our journey. I dare say nobody's journey is linear. I know my journey resembles more a complicated dance pattern than it does a straightforward journey. I suspect it may be the same for many of you.

God meets us where we are. God loves us entirely and will wait, as he did in the story of the king and his daughters, for us to find our skills and gifts.

From Psalm 136, "give thanks to God for He is good and His mercy endures forever."

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Matthew 25.14-30