

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Twenty-fourth Sunday After Pentecost
19 November 2017

Scripture readings:

Judges 4:1-7 Psalm 123 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Matthew 25:14-30

This isn't the kind of text I wanted to come home to: To those who have, more will be given; from those who have nothing, it will be taken away. I think we have to really look at what this parable is all about. I don't think it has much to do with money or how we handle money, even though we're at the end of our stewardship effort and all the rest of it. But what I **do** think this is about is how we as human beings understand ourselves in relationship to God.

Here is a master with slaves. I suppose if we have a starting point to understand how we relate to God, it might be that God is our master and we are slaves. Slave is a tough word for us. It probably wasn't too tough in those days. It's tough for us because it should be tough for us because we have sensitivities about that.

But here is a superior being relating to those who are dependent upon him for their lives. He's going away, and now he's becoming dependent upon them for the survival of his estate. He gives to his slaves each according to his ability. Well, there's a five-talented guy, a two-talented guy, and a one-talented guy. They get what the master thinks they're able to deal with, and they deal with it in different ways. That's still not the point of the story.

What I want to think about is **why** they deal with what they have in different ways. The fact of the matter is that each has what he has because it was given to him freely by the master. Some have a lot, some have less, but the first two guys treat it differently, not because it's more but because of their relationship with the giver. Now it seems to me that one of the major points of Jesus' entire life and ministry was taking on an entire religious system which had been overrun with ideas about who the master was, that looked like the ideas of the third guy in this parable. "*I knew,*"

he says, "*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 to save my own...fill in the blank.*" That was his approach. That was who he understood his God to be. And he was going to play it safe with what God gave him and make sure that he was saved.

Jesus faced an entire religious system that said: Keep yourself clean, and if you find yourself dirty - buy God off. Buy God's anger off with sacrifices. Buy God's anger off with proper behavior - what you eat, what you do with your son's penis...circumcision. Buy God's anger off with your gifts, with your money, with your tithe, with your incense, with your clothing, with your relationship to your neighbor. Keep yourself pure. Make sure God is not angry with you. You will be saved because you will have purchased off the anger of the Almighty.

That's what is called a transactional relationship. We're not foreigners to transactional relationships. We have them and, frankly, **should** have them when it comes to handling and dealing with money. But I think what Jesus is trying to get at is that the way we handle and deal with money is way different from the way we ought to handle and deal with each other, and that we need to be prevented from making the mistake of thinking that my relationship with you is a contractual one because it's like money.

Have you ever known anyone who wanted to purchase your affection? Or maybe you've tried to purchase hers with a bouquet of flowers or a box of candy or a "*Gee, I'm sorry I missed your birthday*" card. You know how we are as human beings. We like to pay our own way, but when we see our relationship with God as contractual, it's like we've let the talent we were given get moldy in the ground. And Jesus said: I have an idea that our relationship with God is not contractual. It's more like the relationship between a loving parent and a child - even a naughty child, even an unlovable child or a child only a mother could love.

The first two guys "got it" because the first two guys were willing to take the risk of losing what they had been given, knowing that they could count on one thing: they would be rewarded for trying and would be

received back home and loved and forgiven if they had failed.

Whoever wrote this parable, I regret that they didn't write one of those in there - that the second guy... Ask me about parables. I'll do a better job than the Bible! *[laughter]* that the second guy took two talents and invested them and lost them and had to come home in 1929 after the stock market crash and, instead of jumping out of a window to his death, went home to a loving father who said, "*OK, you did the best you could with what you had*" and received him back.

The point of this parable is that what we do with what we are given is significantly different in terms of how we see God personally and theologically. I think Jesus is encouraging us to believe that we are among those who have received plenty. Maybe the third guy's problem in the first place was that he only **perceived** that he only had one talent. He may have been given more. That's not what the Bible says, but I didn't write it.

The difference in how we use what we have in this world is made in terms of how we perceive and relate and believe our relationship to God is made and constructed. Now you don't think you're going to get away with me not saying anything political *[laughter]* but in terms of the nations of the world, to look at other people as simply the other side of a contract - no matter how good or bad you think the business is - is to miss the point that not all human relationships are contractual. They are loving, they are personal, they are forgiving, they understand the other as imperfect, they understand the need for forgiveness and acceptance. They understand that there is something about the other who is different which I must have the humility to learn about. That's what is going on with the first two slaves. They are confident of a solid relationship with their master, and that makes a difference in how they relate to each other. It makes a difference in terms of how they use their resources, and it makes a difference at the end of their lives when they realize that they have done the best that they could and do not, therefore, have to see themselves being cast into a pit.

If I were writing this parable, I don't think that the master has to send the third guy into a pit. I think he dug it himself to put the money in and was buried himself with his money. He put himself in the pit. He didn't need to be punished. He punished himself. And I don't think God needs to waste her time punishing us. I think we're better at it than God would ever be.

That is the kernel in this confounding parable that is helpful and useful to me - that Jesus loses his life for positing the idea that God is this loving, that God can love even **you**, to say nothing of **me**. And if we say we believe that, that should color and change and improve our relationship with everybody else in the world we know and especially with those we don't know, because we have a talent that needs not to be buried but to be invested. And that talent is God's love. Good enough?!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.