The Faithful Servant

Matthew 25:14-30
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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Today is week two of our annual Faith Questions sermon series. This week's question emerged out of a *Rejoice!* devotional entry which offered an interesting and unusual interpretation of Matthew 25:14-30.

The devotional in question was from Sunday, November 17. The writer, Craig Morton (a church consultant and philosophy professor from Idaho, according to his bio at the back of the book) took issue with more straightforward readings of Jesus' parable which tend toward being good stewards of the gifts God has given us.

In Morton's short devotional, he struggles with the third servant's description of the master as "harsh man." How could we equate this with Jesus, he wonders?

He also has problems with the implicit individualism and capitalism that could be promoted by the master commending the first two servants. Does not the Torah condemn usury, which surely would have been required to double the master's initial investment?

Could not the third servant be the faithful one, Morton wonders. Perhaps, in refusing to follow unjust, greedy, and possibly even predatory financial practices, the third servant was opting out of a corrupt system.

Indeed, in a blog post that Morton wrote on this same parable (yes, I hunted him down online), he goes a step further and compares the third servant to Jesus himself. [1]

Jesus, like other prophets of social justice like Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, and Martin Luther King considered the consequences of participating in unjust systems and practices and refused to play the empire's game.

[1] https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rdc/2020/11/unexpected-jesus-in-the-parable-of-the-talents/

It is, as I say, not a typical interpretation of this passage. Is it a legitimate one? Is it possible that the third servant is indeed the faithful servant in this parable?

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I'll confess that when I first read this devotional, my first instinct was to say, "Well, that's a pretty ridiculous interpretation of the parable!" This is surely an example of what one of my graduate school professors would have called eisegeis not exegesis.

Exegesis has to do with interpreting the meaning of a passage according to what the author's intention was.

Eisegesis inserts our own presuppositions, agendas or biases into the text. We make it say what we want it to say, what addresses our concerns, what reflects our moral intuitions, even if it was never written to address any of these.

And there is nothing in the text itself or the surrounding context that would lead us to think that Jesus was praising the third servant much less using him as a symbol for his own life and work.

This parable is part of an unbroken section where Jesus is teaching his disciples about what it looks like to be ready for his coming.

It is preceded by the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Five brought oil for their lamps, five did not. As such, when the bridegroom came at midnight, the five who had planned ahead entered the banquet and the other five did not. Jesus was not praising the five who were unprepared.

In the parable immediately after our text this morning, we encounter Jesus' teaching on the sheep and the goats. The sheep in this story were those who busied themselves caring for the least of these, while the goats neglected them.

There is no ambiguity about who Jesus is praising and critiquing in this passage. It was those who were about their master's business, doing the work of the kingdom of God.

So, for the sake of symmetry alone, it would be very odd if, in the parable in the middle of these two, Jesus was praising the servant who hid what he was given out of fear.

In all three parables, Jesus is illustrating the importance of being watchful, creative, and compassionate in his absence and as his disciples await his return.

And yet, one of my *other* graduate school professors also taught us that if we are criticizing any particular viewpoint or interpretation of Scripture, we must begin by affirming what can be affirmed (I've already disobeyed him, it seems!).

So, let's back up a bit and identify what can be affirmed about this unusual interpretation of Jesus' parable.

1. It is good to question interpretations, good to ask questions (like I said last week). I don't think we should automatically just settle for "that's the way we've always understood this text."
    a. If Christians had approached Scripture this way throughout history, we would never make much progress on social issues (slavery, for example, or women's rights). If Mennonites had not historically said, "Now, wait a minute, I don't think the church has been reading the Sermon on the Mount rightly (or at the very least not prioritizing it rightly!), our movement never would have been birthed.
2. And traditional interpretations of this passage do lead to some potentially troubling questions:
    a. Is Jesus really comparing himself and the character of God himself to a "harsh master?" How does this square with the compassion and love that we see in Jesus elsewhere in the gospels?
    b. Do our efforts secure blessing and status in the kingdom of God? The ones who double what they have been given are praised while those who don't or can't are condemned?
    c. If so, how does this square with, say, the Beatitudes which says that those who are blessed are those who seem like failures in the eyes of the world? Does not this picture of the super-achievers winning the prize while those on the bottom of the pile miss out kind of go against the whole "upside down kingdom" that Jesus came to proclaim?
3. What about the grace of God that is greater than all our sin? What about the God whose arms open in embrace before his prodigals even say a word, even after they have blown the inheritance?

These are all good questions. It's important to ask how one story squares with the rest of Jesus' teaching and the rest of the story of Scripture more generally.

But even beyond these conundrums raised by story itself, I wonder if the story sits awkwardly with us because we more naturally see ourselves in the third servant than the first two.

I confess that I have never liked this parable for precisely this reason. I am, by nature, more prone to caution than risk-taking. I'm not particularly entrepreneurially inclined. I admire those who are, but it's just not me.

I would rather protect what I have than risk losing it. This week, Naomi and I were filling out an "investment profile" in connection with my pension. There was a bar on the screen with "low risk" and "high risk." I tend toward the lower end of that bar (Naomi's more of a risk taker!)

I could easily imagine myself being the servant who buried his talent just to be safe. Perhaps the same is true for you.

We're not all wired the same way, after all. Is Jesus saying that everyone has to be an investment expert, whether in the realm of business or church growth or evangelism?

Does God bless only those who are forever seeking to maximalize, who are never content with what they have?

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Well, no I don't think this is the case.

The more I read the parable and commentary on it this week, the more it became obvious to me that this parable is not offering financial advice or telling followers of Jesus that they all have to be the same.

Instead, I think it says three crucially important things about God, about us, and about the life of faith.

First, it points to the staggering generosity and self-limitation of God.

There's a danger in being over-familiar with parables. We've likely heard this story many times, and the word "talent" probably just slides past us.

But a talent was an enormous sum of money. One talent was worth the equivalent of more than fifteen years wages! So, the first servant would have been given the equivalent of a more than a lifetime's wages. Even the one who was given "only" one talent was given a lot!

In the parable, the master puts incredible trust in his servants in entrusting that much wealth to them.

The same is true with God. God is not a miser. God is a giver. And God limits himself by granting us the freedom to do what we will with his gifts. God is not a micro-manager, hovering over us at every step of the journey. God gives us the freedom to learn, to grown, to discover, to experiment.

As one commentator put it, "The kingdom of heaven begins in an act of divine generosity."[2]

Second, God does treat human beings like widgets, expecting the exact same "return" from everyone.

It says in verse 15, that the master gave to each "according to their ability." I think this points to the fact that God knows each one of us individually and personally.

The master does not chastise the second servant for not producing the same return as the first. In the same way, I don't believe that God expects each one of us to respond to what we've been given in precisely the same way.

God simply expects us simply to be faithful with what we've been given.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, I think the parable is speaking about our basic disposition in the life of faith.

What, in the end, is the problem with the third servant's response? It seems so natural to us. How could the mater respond so harshly to such an understandable response?

Well, I think the first thing to note is that the servant criticizes the master in order to justify his timid decision to opt for security rather than creative investment.

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[2] Lindsay P. Armstrong, "Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 25:14-20" in *Feasting on the Word, Year 1, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 311.

We don't hear anything about the harshness of the master until the third servant. The first two don't mention it. There was nothing harsh in the master's initial instructions to the three disciples. All it says is that he summoned the three servants and gave them a gift.

But even more importantly, the third servant's approach is characterized by fear. Verse 25 says it plainly: I was afraid and so I hid your talent in the ground.

He played it safe rather than taking even a small risk.

This is obviously an interesting moment in history and in our lives to think about fear and risk. For the better part of the last year, it seems we have thought of little else!

Our church, like many others, has been constantly weighing risk and safety throughout the past ten plus months. I told someone recently that it's felt like for the last year, 50% of every meeting I've been a part of has been dominated by COVID talk.

I've been thinking a lot about this word "safe" over the last year and as I wrestled with this passage this week.

We know, of course, that life is not safe, and it never has been. COVID-19 is simply laying bare in acute form what is always true for each one of us.

All of life has risk attached to it. Bad things happen, despite our best efforts to avoid them. Sickness and disease stalk us all the time. We manage to ignore these realities most of the time, but that doesn't make them any less real.

Andrew Sullivan put it well in an article called "How to Survive a Plague":

> Living in a plague is just an intensified way of living. It merely unveils the radical uncertainty of life that is already here, and puts it into far sharper focus. We will all die one day, and we will almost all get sick at some point in our lives; none of this makes sense on its own (especially the dying part). The trick, as the great religions teach us, is counterintuitive: not to seize control, but to gain some balance and even serenity in absorbing what you can't.[3]

[3] https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2020/03/andrew-sullivan-how-to-survive-the-coronavirus-pandemic.html

I think Sullivan's description of the human predicament is bang on. His last sentence, however, is where we disagree.

"Balance and serenity" might be suitable words for some kind of generic category of "religion," but they're an awkward fit for those of us who have cast our lot with Jesus of Nazareth.

They're "safe" words and there is nothing particularly safe about choosing to follow the way of Jesus through this life. We naturally wish this were the case and we very often reduce it to this.

But there are just so many unsafe words that fell from our Saviour's lips.

Words about taking up crosses and losing our life that we might gain it, for example. Words about scandalous generosity and irrational mercy. Words about love. So many words about love.

And what could be less safe than love? Love of neighbour is risky. Other people are always potential sources of rapturous joy and deep connection or, sadly, indescribable pain. Anyone who has been a parent or a spouse or a sibling or a friend knows this well.

Loving even the lovable is risky, to say nothing of Jesus' crazy words about loving our enemies.

Jesus offers to us many things. Life, love, forgiveness, light for the journey, hope for the present and the future, meaning, salvation, in the truest and deepest sense of all these words. But he does not offer safety.

If we allow our lives to be dominated by fear rather than confident engagement and trust, we settle for less than what we have been created for. We were created for so much more than safety and we ignore this at our peril.

Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan sums it up well in his commentary on this passage:

> The point here is not really about doubling your money and accumulating wealth. It is about living. It is about investing. It is about taking risks…
>
> The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe… not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it

> safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.[4]

This, in the end, is what I feel that the devotional that spurred this question is most wrong about.

The reason the third servant cannot be the faithful servant is not because he had questions about the master's character or because he perhaps offered a critique of various economic practices in the ancient world.

There may be varying degrees of truth to either of these critiques but neither are the point Jesus was making in that context.

The third servant's mistake was to blame his master for his unwillingness to live and to embrace the staggering gift he had been given. His mistake was to be dominated by fear and the illusory safety that he imagined it brought him.

We have each been given a life to live. This is a gift, and we will be held accountable for what we do with it.

May God help us not to bury this precious gift in fear. May God help us to live, to risk, to trust, and to love confidently in imitation of the Giver.

Amen.

[4] John M. Buchanan, "Pastoral Perspective on Matthew 25:14-30" in *Feasting on the Word, Year 1, Vol. 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 310.