

Good News for the “Worthless”

Matthew 25: 13-30

“For it 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. At once the one who had received the five talents went off 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, 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.’

Imagine a modern spin on Jesus’ parable. Picture a rich real estate mogul calling three apprentices to his office and saying, “I need to take the private jet to go check on some of my other properties. While I’m gone I need you to take care of my other investments. Here’s five million dollars for apprentice #1. Two million for apprentice #2. And one million bucks for apprentice #3. Now go make some wise investments and remember: the more I make, the more you make. So two of the apprentices go out looking for deals. They buy up properties, making those endlessly annoying telemarketing calls asking if we want a cash offer for our house. They flip some apartments. They make some good cash-on-cash returns. Except, one of them doesn’t participate. She buries the million under her mattress. Maybe she doesn’t believe in herself. Maybe she doesn’t trust the process. Whatever the reason, she doesn’t play. So when the boss comes back to settle up, he offers two of his employees a promotion. “You’ve been faithful to me. Enter into my joy,” he says. But for the 3rd apprentice he has some crass words: “What’s the matter with you? You could’ve at least earned a few bucks in a money market! Now get out of my sight! You’re worthless! You’re fired!” What an odd parable for Jesus to tell just before he goes to the cross, isn’t it?

As odd of a story as it is, we think we know it pretty well. Most of us hear the parable around stewardship season about how God has given us all gifts and as we wait for Jesus to return, we are not to bury what has been entrusted to us. Instead, we are to invest our gifts in such a way that God’s kingdom will grow, right? So whatever we do, DO NOT be like the lazy 3rd servant. That is, unless we want to end up in a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth—

which doesn't sound like a resort any of us would want to visit, much less spend the rest of eternity. It's how we've grown to interpret Jesus' parable. I mean, even to this day when someone has passed on into the next life, we imagine the master saying, "well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into my joy!" We have heard it all before. We know where the parable is headed: whatever you do, don't bury your talent!

Except, here's the problem: if we interpret the story's little "m" master as the capital "M" Master—i.e. God—then God is pretty harsh. Is God greedy, reaping where God doesn't sow? Does God feel like we are, "wicked and lazy" if we don't multiply the investment? Does God call people worthless just because they don't play the Monopoly game? If we go back to Jesus' time elite landowners usually acquired vast amounts of land by offering loans to struggling farmers at outrageous interest rates—anywhere from 60% to 200%. When the desperate farmers couldn't pay off the loan the landowners would foreclose on the property. So these farmers would have no other choice but to sell their properties if they wanted to continue to feed their families. Landowners in Jesus' time were ruthless businesspeople. And when they were away to check in on their other properties, they would entrust their servants to collect on outstanding debts in their absence. The more the master made, the more commission the apprentice made. Two of the servants adopt the lifestyle and values of the master and are rewarded generously for it. But the 3rd servant does not do her job. She does not make any money for herself and, more importantly, does not make any money for her little "m" master. She simply doesn't participate and then offers him back what is his—no more, no less.

Now let's ask ourselves: is it God's system who calls people wicked and lazy and worthless if they don't increase the privileges of the "haves" at the expense of the "have nots?" Or is this the way our system operates? Does God reap where God puts no effort, and does God gather where God had not prepared, or is this something little "m" master do? Does God throw temper tantrums on Twitter, lashing out at people when God doesn't get the outcome God wants, or does that sound like somebody else? I mean, could we ever imagine Jesus taking anything away from those who have little and giving it to those who already have a lot?

So now the question: Who is the exemplary figure in the story?

Here's a theological quiz: When Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, who does he say the Kingdom of God belongs to: those who have little or those who have a lot?

When Jesus talks about money and our treasure being where our heart is, what does he say about serving two masters: about little "m" master and capital "M" Master?

In the very next paragraph—after this parable—who does Jesus identify with: those who ignore the poor or those who serve the poor?

Forgive me, that is a trick question: because Jesus identifies *as the poor!*

He identifies with those who the privileged call lazy.

He identifies with the incarcerated, who the world labels, "wicked."

He identifies with those who venture economies discard as "worthless."

So back to the question: who is the exemplary figure in the story and how did the parable become a passage about *not burying our talent?*

But still, there is one part of the parable that I cannot reconcile: when the 3rd servant says, “I was afraid, so I buried your money.” If the 3rd servant is the hero, why is fear the motivator?

Then I almost fell out of my chair when I looked up the Greek. You see, the word for “fear” here is a rare ambiguous word which could be translated in one of two ways: either “I was afraid, because you are a harsh man...so I buried your money” which is how we usually interpret it. Or “you [master] are feared, because you are a harsh man.” In other words, the master has a reputation. And so the 3rd servant buries the money as a way of refusing to participate. It’s a strike against the system of fear and scarcity which opportunistically takes advantage of the poor. Perhaps that is why Jesus tells us this parable just before he goes to the cross, just before he is the one who is cast out into darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. To give us the raw reality of what happens when we use our privileged capital to do what is fair and true and just.

As a Matthew 25 church in a Matthew 25 presbytery, we say we are committed to three things: 1) building up congregational vitality; 2) dismantling structural racism; and 3) eradicating systemic poverty. These are Goliath undertakings! If we are going to dismantle systemic racism and end structural poverty it will require us to participate in a different system which enables wholeness and reinforces our dignity, rather than a system which diminishes it. So where do we begin?

In Seattle there is an indigenous people cultural center for the Duwamish tribe who once resided in the land before being pushed out. The center is a gathering place for building vital community where they honor their heritage and make their story visible. It also tells the truth that native reservations continue to be the most impoverished places in the nation. On their website they have a tab for something called, “Real Rent Duwamish.” Real Rent is a program where non-natives can voluntarily pay rent for the land they occupy. There is no binding legal agreement, no transaction. Rather, it is a practical way to join in their resistance against a system which has produced generations of traumatic harm and treated them as if they were worthless.

So perhaps we start by doing what the 3rd servant did: we tell the truth about how the system operates and then invest in ways of repairing the harm the system has perpetuated.

It's no small task; but as a Matthew 25 Church, we get to decide which character in the story Jesus is calling the church to be.

We get to decide which master—little “m” or big “M”—will call us “good and faithful servants.” And ultimately, we get to decide whose joy we will participate in and one day enter into.