

ENTERING INTO GOD'S JOY

Matthew 25:14-30

The parables that Jesus tells are such interesting things: they tend to appear one way on the surface, but as you dive deeper into their meaning and work to discover where God is and how God is at play in these stories, they change and morph into something different. Parables can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. And the way we interpret them or the messages we glean from them often changes depending on what's going on in our own lives, or how old we are, or how much we're looking for God versus how much we're just seeking the answer we want to find.

The parable we heard today is one that is often interpreted in some particular ways. There is a rich man who is going on a journey. Before he leaves he gives three servants different amounts of money: to one, 5 talents; to the next 2 talents; to the last 1 talent. It's a lot of money. A talent was a sum of money equal to about 15 years' worth of wages for the average labourer. Just one talent was worth that much. So the last servant got 15 years' worth of wages, the second got 30 years' worth of wages, and the first got 75 years' worth of wages. In today's terms, that's like being entrusted with \$1 million, \$5 million, or \$10 million. Then the rich man goes away. After a long time he returns to settle up with his servants. The first servant has doubled his masters' money, as has the second, and the rich man is overjoyed with this increase in wealth and rewards the servants with greater responsibilities and partnership with them. The third servant, however, has earned no extra money. In fear of the master, he buried his talent while the master was gone and now hands it back in full. The rich man is not pleased with this and reacts harshly, having expected more.

In our world where profit and productivity is viewed as paramount, some might side with the rich man on this one; indeed, the third servant could have at least put his money in the bank and earned some interest rather than burying it and earning nothing more. The parable could be interpreted to mean that God has given us the tools to build God's kingdom through financial stewardship—through gifts of money to the church in order for the church to keep doing God's important work in the world. But is God really most at work through our money? And what about those who aren't able to give financially? Where, then, is their place in this version of God's kingdom?

So then perhaps the money—the talents—represents something else. The word talent, in our English language, refers to particular gifts or skills that a person possesses. Sometimes this parable is interpreted to mean that we shouldn't bury our talents—that

is, our God-given gifts and skills; we instead should go out and use them to God's glory. We should use our talents to improve and support and care for God's great creation: to work toward justice and peace, to share love and extend grace, to care for all the vulnerable people and creatures and elements of creation. God has given us gifts and we shouldn't sit on them until Christ Jesus—the master— returns, but we should use them to build God's kingdom of love and compassion every day. However, if this is the case, would God really punish those who don't use their gifts or talents, as with the third servant? Would Jesus want to make those who aren't using their gifts and talents become one of the marginalized, shamed, and ostracized?

Maybe this parable is telling us to get out there and live—that if we don't take some risks, like trying to double the things, whether money, talents, or any element of God's goodness and love that helps people to flourish; if we hold back and don't do anything that expresses love or sheds light—then we're not truly living. It could be telling us that the greatest risk of all is not to risk anything: to not care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. Maybe the greatest risk is not living up to the full potential of our humanity.

Certainly elements of all these interpretations can be seen as good. So, the instructions for the disciples could be this: once Jesus, the master, is gone from this earth, they are to continue to demonstrate their faithfulness by building God's kingdom in ways that emulate Christ's ministry of feeding the hungry, healing the sick, showing compassion, bringing justice, and serving the last until his return.

But the ending of the parable doesn't make this as straightforward as we might like it to be. If "the master" is representative of God or Jesus, then we've got some sticky issues to work through, because the master sounds like a pretty cruel person.

Let's look back at what happens with the third servant. He is given one talent and, playing it safe, chooses to bury it. Now, this might seem like an odd choice to you and me today, but at the time this was considered a very reasonable security measure. When the master returns, the third servant explains his actions: he is driven, for the most part, by fear. He describes the master as someone who reaps where he did not sow and gathers where he did not scatter. He has high standards and expects his servants to work without error. In fear of angering the master, the third servant buries the talent so that he could safely return it without having lost a cent. Or, perhaps he buries it as a form of defiance—a way to say that he refuses to play into this make-the-rich-richer money-making scheme. What we find, of course, is that the master has very particular opinions on how the money was managed. The master reacts harshly,

criticizing the third servant for not investing in a way that would increase the master's wealth. And the punishment for this is having all the third servant's money taken away and given to the first servant, while the third servant is thrown into the outer darkness. Pretty harsh.

Now, if we assume that the master in this parable is God, then this ending doesn't align with what we know of God. God is not one for punishing or condemning, which is exactly what happens to that third servant. So then, is this harsh and greedy master really a comparison for God? Does the God who came to us as a tiny baby in a stable, the God who taught about love and justice and compassion, the God who loved us to death on a cross, the God of empty tombs, the God who is with us in the breaking of bread, does that God really operate in such a harsh way? Does that God really say "I have given you so much and you owe me at least the interest back on it all." Does that God really say "Give what you have to those who are already rich and in my good books, and go live in the shadow and darkness of all your failures"? And if this harsh and angry master is *not* an example of God, then what is this parable really about?

One of the things that the rich master says to the first two servants upon learning that they have doubled his wealth is "you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master" (Mt. 25:23). What does that mean, to enter into the joy of the master? Well, it seems to be a way of being in partnership with the master: if you do certain tasks and can show yourself to be trustworthy, the master will partner with you so that, together, you can work toward a common goal. And if that common goal were up to this greedy man, then the business of building God's kingdom, the business of providing healing and paths to wholeness, and encouraging hope and faith would actually just be about power and wealth. Entering into his joy—that is, entering into partnership with him—would be all about how to get more: more money, more power, more personal gain, more attention and glory. It would be about stepping on whoever is necessary to rise higher, and tossing those who aren't aligned with this view of "more, more, more" into the outer darkness.

We might think that this sounds a lot like our greedy, profit-driven world today, and in fact, it was also like that in Jesus' day. If you wanted to be righteous and pure according to the laws and traditions of ancient Israel, you would find it a much easier task if you were wealthy. And as we move through time to today we can continually find examples of times and places where salvation is tied to how much wealth and power you hold. So, to enter into the joy of the harsh and greedy master, you must do the tasks he sets out for you: earn money, gain affluence, and acquire power on his behalf; and if you succeed with those, then you will be invited to be in partnership with him. Though, note

that this partnership isn't totally equal—even with more responsibilities and mutual trust, the master will still refer to you as his servant.

What, then, does it look like to enter the joy of God? If, like the third servant, we don't wish to be in partnership with greed and wealth and negative power, how do we enter into partnership with God, instead?

Unlike with the rich master, we don't have to work for an unknown number of years in order to earn trust with God. We don't have to perform a specific set of tasks in order to be invited into partnership with God. Entering into the joy of God is an open invitation that is never taken away. It is freely given. In fact, we were created to be in partnership with God. Right from the start we, as God's created beings, have been invited to partner with God in the care of the earth, the animals, the ecosystem, and one another. We have all been invited to rule and participate in the flourishing of the world; it isn't a role for just one master or one leader or one greedy rich man. God invites us, those made in God's image, into partnership to engage in the day to day acts of work and creativity that moves the world in a direction that sheds light, expresses love, embraces forgiveness, works for peace and justice, and leads all toward wholeness, toward salvation.

The question this parable asks us is: will we engage in this day to day work, this kingdom building, based on God's definition of what faith and wholeness is, or will we attempt to rule based on our own definition which leads to selfish actions and the use of control and power for self advantage?

What if we look at the third servant as someone who wished to be in partnership with God rather than with a master who struck fear in him? What if the third servant was refusing to engage in a system that only made the rich richer and increased power for those who abused their authority? What if the third servant sought real faith, sought true healing and wholeness and transformation without the use of money? What if the third servant knew what the kingdom of God was meant to be and was working toward that instead of giving in to a harsh money-centred, power-wielding master?

In fact, what if the kingdom of heaven isn't like a harsh wealthy person but is like the servant who didn't want to play along? What if the kingdom of heaven is someone who shows up and says no to the empire? What if it is someone who isn't afraid to tell the powerful the truth of what the master and the master's cronies are doing: reaping what they didn't sew and gathering what they didn't scatter? What if the kingdom of heaven is

like someone who refuses to play into the system and, in return, is tossed by the ruling body into the outer darkness?

Can the outer darkness be part of God's kingdom?

Yes. Absolutely. Because you know who went all the way to the outer darkness for us? Jesus. Jesus enters the outer darkness of our power-obsessed world. He enters the outer darkness of our deepest shame. He enters the outer darkness of our desire for retaliation, our sins, our grieving, our loneliness, our desire for more, more, more. Jesus willingly goes into the outer darkness because he refuses to play the silly games of the rich and powerful. And so it is for us, when we enter into God's joy, we're also entering into the darkness. Because God is there, too. Being in God's joy means that when we have those stretches of darkness we need not fear the way the third servant feared the greedy master. Being in God's joy means being in a partnership where there is forgiveness, there is grace, there is hope, there is healing, there is love. Being in God's joy means being part of a kingdom that stands up for justice and turns away from human systems that reward the powerful and further crush the vulnerable.

The Lord's Prayer is a beautifully subversive declaration of what the kingdom really is: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We who pray these words have a different agenda from those who subscribe to this wealth and power-driven world. We align ourselves with one who was cast out but does not retaliate. We align ourselves with one who was treated harshly but seeks peace. We align ourselves with one who was crucified but continues to love enemies. We align ourselves with one who was judged and condemned but who chooses forgiveness.

Entering into God's joy is the way we can build God's kingdom here and now. Entering into that partnership and working toward the flourishing of all people, the transformation of all people, the healing of all people—even when it takes us into the outer darkness—*that's* where faith and wholeness truly lies.

Come, enter, and join into this joyful partnership with God. The invitation has always been there. Come, enter, and help to build the kingdom of heaven here on earth—a place for the flourishing of all that is built on a foundation of love and grace, of justice and hope. Open your eyes to what Jesus is pointing us to: a God who comes without power, but instead with love. Amen.