

A sermon preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT
on the 25th Sunday after Pentecost, (Proper 28-A),
November 19, 2023, by the Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18. Psalm 90:1-12. 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. Matthew 25: 14-30

Have you noticed that sometimes it is difficult to understand the parables of Jesus? Even the first disciples of Jesus could not understand what he meant by his parables sometimes. So when we have difficulty understanding parables, we need to be patient and keep asking the Spirit of Jesus to help us understand what Jesus might want to say to us through them. Often there is no one correct meaning, but several different insights might be hidden in a parable.

In the parable we heard today, Jesus says to his disciples, in his last major conversation with them before his crucifixion: "When I leave this earth, you need to remember this story. 'It's going to be like a man, going away for an extended trip. He called his trusted servants together, and delegated responsibility for his possessions to them. To one he gave 5 talents, to another 2 talents, and to another 1 talent. He gave to each according to their abilities.

To understand this story, we need know that in the time of Jesus, a talent was the most valuable unit of money available. One talent was worth between 25 and 30 thousand dollars. It was also the largest unit of weight in the time of Jesus, weighing about 75 pounds. So this was a very wealthy man entrusting a huge fortune to his three servants. Then the master left on long journey.

The servants must have been overwhelmed by their responsibility, and eager to be good stewards of their master's fortune. The one with the 5 talents immediately began to trade with them, invest them. Of course, it was a risk, but he was eager to increase their worth for his master. The one with the 2 talents did the same thing right away. Curiously, the servant with the 1 talent was so afraid of losing his master's money that he buried it in the ground so no one would steal it.

After a long time, the owner returned and asked his servants to report to him what they had done with the huge amounts of money he had entrusted to them. The servant who was given 5 talents stepped forward first and said, 'I've doubled the money you entrusted to me. Here are your 10 talents. The master was impressed. He said, well done, you've proved that you are a good and trustworthy servant, so I'll put you in charge of many more things in my business so you can experience the joy of working alongside me.

The second servant came forward and said, "Master, you entrusted 2 talents to my care. See, I've doubled their worth. Here are your 4 talents." Again, the master affirmed the good stewardship of the servant and put him in charge of more things in his business so he could experience the joy of working closely with the master.

Then the 3rd servant came forward. (In the Message translation,) he said to his master, "I know you are a harsh man. You have high standards and hate careless ways; you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is safe and sound down to the last cent."

"The master was furious. 'That's a terrible way to live! It's criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the talent with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. Take the talent and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this "play-it-safe" who won't go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.'

So, what do you imagine Jesus might have been saying to his disciples and to us through this parable?

Many of us react negatively to this parable because of the harsh way the master treats the servant with the one talent. If God or Jesus is like the master, it is terrifying to think that God might be cruel and harsh and throw us or anyone out into outer darkness.

But notice that nowhere does the parable say that God or Jesus is like the harsh master in the story. So how do we know what God is really like? Remember the thief who was nailed to a cross next to Jesus? The man must have stolen a lot of money or property to be considered worthy of crucifixion. Yet, when he asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into his Kingdom, Jesus said, without any judgement or criticism, today you will be with me in paradise. That Jesus does not sound like the harsh master in this parable.

Remember the respect Jesus showed as he talked with the woman at the well, who was from a hated race of people, from a disrespected religion and who had had 5 husbands and was currently living with a man to whom she was not married and was considered an outcast in her village? Jesus never criticized her or condemned her. He offered her living water that would sustain her to eternal life. Jesus is consistently kind and loving to people who are social and moral failures and forgives them, welcomes them into his community, his Kingdom.

We see another example of God's mercy in today's first reading from the prophet Zephaniah. At first it sounds like horrible news. Zephaniah warns people about "the great day of the Lord...a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom (which God) will bring upon the people of Judah...because they have sinned against the Lord."

Yet after this frightening warning, God says to the people, "Gather together... Seek the Lord, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek justice, seek humility." God will defend and protect you when the troubles come. (Zephaniah 2:1,3)

So, whenever we read parables or prophets in the Bible or listen to preachers who seem to portray God or Jesus as cruel, demanding masters out to condemn people, remember: that is not how Jesus lived. Jesus was often very sad, frustrated and hurt by the way people behaved, and by the natural consequences of their wrong behavior. Yet, Jesus came to show us that God is love, always eager to forgive and have mercy and help us live

more in harmony with God's good will and purpose for us all. Jesus demonstrated what God is like by the way he lived here on earth among us imperfect human beings.

Perhaps Jesus is trying to tell his disciples and us, that God has given a huge, very precious treasure to each of us. The loving God, the Holy Trinity, has come to live inside our bodies, minds, and hearts. God's loving Spirit is eager to guide us so that we can invest and multiply the love God has given us by sharing that love with other people in need around us. God did not put us on this earth just to do our own thing and live our own way. God expects us to take risks, like Jesus did, to love and care for people who may not love us back. Even though Jesus is not physically present with us now, he will check back with us to see how we are investing and sharing the great treasure, the loving Spirit of Jesus, which God has placed in our hearts. The more we take risks to share God's love with others, the more God draws us into a closer, more joyful relationship with him, as we partner with God to share God's healing presence and forgiving love with a needy world, just as Jesus did.

What about the 3rd servant who buried the treasure?

Perhaps the point is to remind us that God really cares about what we do with our lives each day. God is very disappointed when we don't invest or share and multiply the loving presence of God which we have been given, with others around us.

The 3rd servant also reminds us that one temptation we all struggle with is our fears. We may fear that we aren't good enough for God, fear that God or other people won't love or respect us, fear that we might fail. We can be tempted live our lives paralyzed by our fears, refusing to take risks of investing the love God has for us by caring for our neighbors in need. If we bury or ignore the treasure of God's love out of fear, then we disappoint God. We've been less than God created us to be and we miss the joy of a closer relationship with God.

Perhaps the cruel master in the story could represent the self-critical, self-judgmental voices in each of us and in some people around us, constantly accusing us that we are not worthy of being God's beloved children, that God does not live in our bodies, that God does not care what we do with our lives, that there is no hope for us when we come before God and must report on how we have lived our lives. In the Bible, the Devil is called our accuser, a critical voice that can speak in our minds and make us bury our treasure out of fear.

In this parable, Jesus might also be speaking to a much larger context than our lives as individuals. In what ways might we as a parish, a nation, a world, be burying the treasure of love which God has given us, paralyzed by fears instead of taking risks to love and serve people and needs that are outside our comfort zones?

One more important observation: If this parable makes you feel guilty that you are not doing enough, that God expects you to go out and work harder to be better this week so God will love you more...then you will have missed the point of the parable. If we feel we can only

please God if we work harder to become more perfect in everything we do, then we will always feel like failures. We will be trapped in fear, want to give up on such a demanding God and give up even trying, just like the 3rd servant.

God knows that no matter how hard we try, you and I can't manage our lives so that we are perfect. Sometimes, out of fear and guilt, we try to do more or do something different than God asks us to do. We may be afraid to exercise tough love when something is not right. God says to us, relax and trust me, but too often we rush ahead and take control, which ends up causing more problems than help.

Good stewards of God's love are motivated by gratitude, not guilt. (repeat)

We keep remembering that God loves us as we are. God doesn't wait for us to be perfect or to work harder before God loves us. We need the humility to recognize that we can't be good stewards of God's love unless we keep asking God to help us. We ask, "O Lord, what do you want me to be and do for you and others today? You and I both know that I get distracted, I forget, so I can't actually follow you unless you help me. So throughout today, please keep helping and guiding me."

One day at a time, God's Spirit wants to show us the next little steps God wants us to take as good stewards of the precious gift of God's love which has already been given to us.

Let's close our eyes for a moment: In the silence, what might God be saying to you this morning through our reflections on the parable of Jesus?...

With gratitude for God's love for you, what little next step might Jesus be inviting you to take this week, to practice being a good steward of God's great love for you?...

Come Holy Spirit, re-fill the hearts of your people gathered here and around the world this morning. Every day this week, rekindle in us the fire of your Divine Love, for the healing of this broken and hurting world. Amen.