

**24 Pentecost
November 15, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

This is a stewardship sermon. However, it is not a sermon about making a financial pledge to St. Cyprian's ... this is about a different kind of stewardship. This is about stewardship of passive resistance ... of civil disobedience. It is about how this story from two thousand years ago is true in the world around us today.

"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."

This is the parable that Jesus told. It begins ... as so many of his parables begin ... with "The kingdom of Heaven ..." This parable is about a master and three stewards. The master is going on a journey so he entrusts his wealth to his "stewards" ... (I'm using the word "steward" as I believe it is a more descriptive word for the role these men play, instead of the word "slave.")

To one steward the master gave five talents, to another he gave two talents, and to the third he gave one talent ... and the text says "to each according to their ability." After a time the master returned from his journey and asked for an accounting. The first steward had doubled his investment, from five to ten talents. The second had also doubled the investment, from two to four talents. The third steward, meanwhile, dug a hole in the ground and buried the single talent that had been given to him. When the master returned, the stewards who had turned a profit are commended, gifted with more wealth, and invited to "enter into the joy" of their master. But the third steward was called "wicked," "lazy," and "worthless," and cast into the outer darkness. The story in Matthew's gospel ends with *"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."*

This is a story we usually associate with stewardship, and is often used as the basis for a stewardship sermon to kickoff a church's annual campaign. Many preachers interpret the parable this way by equating the "master" with God. Our Master ... God ... has entrusted each one of us with "talents" ... money, assets, intelligence, strengths ... according to our ability ... and God expects us to invest those talents boldly and creatively for the sake of the Kingdom. If we do so, God will praise and reward us accordingly. However, if we "bury" our talents, refusing to invest them as God desires,

God will consider us “worthless” stewards, and we will suffer the unpleasant consequences of our master’s ... God’s ... displeasure.

Even the moral of the story which is attached at the end of the parable as if to explain it ... which many scholars believe was probably added to Jesus’ original words ... is confusing in light of other things Jesus has said.

For me, the analogy of God-as-wealthy-steward-master doesn’t align with the gracious and justice-oriented God Jesus describes throughout the Gospels ... the God who privileges the poor, blesses the meek, frees the prisoner, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, liberates the slave, and protects the orphan.

I find it hard to reconcile Jesus ... God incarnate in a human being ... the Jesus who lived among the peasants ... with a greedy estate owner who “reaps where he doesn’t sow, and gathers where he doesn’t scatter.” And I don’t recognize the kingdom of God in a story where those who have plenty receive still more, while those who have close to nothing lose even the little they have ... and then face God’s wrath on top of those losses.

So, I suggest we take a look at this story with fresh eyes, perhaps even trying to imagine what the people in Jesus’ time might have heard when listening to this parable.

First of all, we have to remember that a “talent” was a denomination of currency, and a rather large one at that. Many New Testament scholars today believe that a talent was the equivalent of a full year’s wage ... enough to support a small family for a whole year. Other scholars estimate a talent was worth as much as twenty years’ wages. Either way, a talent represented a staggering amount of money to Jesus’ peasant audience. An unthinkable, lottery-jackpot-sum that only the wealthiest elite might possess, and possibly getting a head start through a sizable inheritance.

Secondly, we have to remember that there was no stock market, commodities exchange, mutual funds, pension plans, or certificates of deposit to be purchased at the corner bank in the time of Jesus. The way to invest your capital was to lend money to those who owned land so that they could buy seed to plant their crops. This money was lent at high interest rates, and when the crops were harvested the lender would either collect the interest and principal or, if the borrower could not repay the loan, the lender would foreclose on the property and sell it. Today, we call this “predatory lending.” And, two thousand years later, banks and investors are still guilty of predatory lending. It was one of the primary causes of the economic recession in 2008.

However, Jesus told these stories not to the wealthy of his society, but to those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. They very well may have been people who had lost their land to lenders. If that were the case, I would imagine that the hero in this story would not have been the steward who was able to turn five talents into ten, but

rather the steward who defied his master and opted out of the system that exploited the poor at the hands of the rich. What was the stewardship of the steward who had one talent? It was his willingness to incur his master's wrath, and to even lose his job, so that he did not take advantage of his fellow countrymen. Today we call this "passive resistance" ... a form of civil disobedience.

Two of the stewards in this parable do exactly as they were told. They took their talents out into the world and double them on the backs of the poor. Who knows how many fields they seize, how many farmers they impoverish, how many families they destroy? It doesn't matter ... they fulfill the bottom line ... they make a profit. When the master returned and saw what they had accomplished on his behalf, he was thrilled. He invited the two enterprising stewards to enter into his "joy" ... the joy of further wealth, further profit, further exploitation.

But the third steward? The third steward in the story opted out. He decided that his master's character was greedy and corrupt, and that he no longer wanted to participate in a dishonest system of gain ... a system based on oppression and injustice. Knowing full well what it would cost him, the steward buried the talent in the ground. He hid it, literally taking it out of circulation, putting it where it would do no further harm to the poor.

Is it any surprise that the master abused and banished the third steward when he returned from his journey? The steward is more than a quiet hero ... he is a whistleblower. At great cost to himself, he named the exploitation ... the same abuse he colluded in and benefited from for years. He relinquished his claim on wealth and comfort ... he called out the master's greed and miserliness ... *"I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed"* ... and he accepted the ostracism and poverty that must follow from his choice.

Maybe this is a parable about the world we occupy right now. A parable about what faithfulness looks like in a world of income and wealthy inequality ... a world where the richest 10% of the people own 85% of the wealth ... where the bottom half collectively owns barely 1% ... a world where the average person in the top 10% owns nearly 3,000 times the wealth of the average person in the bottom 10%.

Maybe this is a parable about our own complicity in the system ... and the high stakes involved in ending it. A parable about speaking truth to power. A parable about opting out of systems of oppression and exploitation ... even ... and especially ... when we are accustomed to benefiting from such systems. A parable about interrupting "business as usual" for the sake of justice and mercy. A parable about turning reality upside down in the name of love. A parable about saying, "Enough is enough," when it comes to the abuse and marginalization of the world's most vulnerable people. A parable about the rejection, impoverishment, and loneliness we might suffer if we take seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Does this interpretation of the parable go too far? Does it provoke too much? Or, prod too hard? Consider this ... Jesus asks nothing of us that he has not done himself. Just days after telling this parable, Jesus was “cast into the outer darkness” of crucifixion, torment, and death. Like the third steward, he was deemed "worthless" and expendable by the people who wielded power and influence in his day. Like the third steward's costly talent, he was buried in a rock-hewn tomb. Apparently, there is a good kind of "worthless" in the economy of God. May we find the courage to embody it.

Yes, this is a stewardship sermon ... but a different kind of stewardship. Stewardship is more than just opening one's wallet or checkbook and making a donation to the church. Stewardship is a way of life. It is about seeing our lives and everything around us as a gift from God. This God of all Creation willingly bestows upon us gifts beyond our imagination. Sometimes they are abundant and full of wonder and beauty and are received joyfully. Yet, even with abundant gifts we are called to be “stewards” of what has been given to us, not just possessors as if “owning” entitled one to avoid the responsibility to greater community of God's beloved.

We are stewards ... not mere possessors of these gifts. When our bounty is at the expense of others in God's Creation ... at the expense of other people ... at the expense of nature resources ... at the expense of future generations ... we are at odds with God's purposes for this world we live in. Our faithful stewardship is to creatively respond to other's needs ... respond to other people's needs ... respond to need for the preservation of the world's natural resources ... and to secure a world today worth leaving to generations yet to come.

I encourage you to see your faith as a prayer of stewardship ... a response to God, in thought and by deed, with and without words. Care for the earth ... because it is God's creation. Care for those with whom we share this planet, in our backyard and across the globe ... because we are all God's children regardless of nationality, or tribe, or the color of our skin, or the faith to which we are committed. Care for those who come after us ... for they too are the children of God. And, care for this community of faith ... because we are doing the work of God in this corner of God's vineyard.

Yes, this is a stewardship sermon. Just a different kind of stewardship ... a form of stewardship that may cause us to be thrown into an “outer darkness.” But, if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we must remember that he was thrown into an “outer darkness” at his crucifixion ... and three days later he was raised to new life ... the same new life we are promised.

Remember, this parable begins with, “The kingdom of heaven will be like when ...” In the world today, it is not too difficult to look around us and see those who are accumulating wealth at the expense of others ... foreclosing on families homes in spite of a pandemic ... exploiting natural resources to make a profit now, at the expense of

destroying unreplaceable pieces of God's creation ... and of burdening future generations with an reasonable debt so that they can live high-on-the-hog today. Maybe Jesus is calling us to a different kind of stewardship. It may be costly ... we may be excluded ... we may have to do with less ... but if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, it is a stewardship to be taken seriously.

Amen.