

Invitation to Adventure
A Sermon on Matthew 25:14-30
Proper 28
November 19, 2017

Introduction

How many times has someone asked you, what did you do today? What they are really asking is, what adventures do you go on today? People show they care about you by asking what you did today. They also may be hoping to vicariously experience your adventures for the day.

Most of our lives is tedium and repetition. Going through the daily routine. You can set a clock by some people and their routines. Adventure is what makes life worth living. It is the newness breaking into our lives.

Today's parable is about three servants and their adventures in faith.

First Move: A Surface Reading of the Parable

The first adventure is analyzing this parable to determine what comes from the historical Jesus and what comes from Matthew and Matthew's community.

The parable is about a master and three slaves. A master is preparing to go on a long journey. He calls three slaves and turns over his property to them. The master has eight talents, which is an extravagant amount of money. A talent was equal to about 15 years' wages. It would be like a million dollars today. The master hands all his money over to the slaves. These were no ordinary slaves. The man trusted these slaves. They had shown the ability to handle large sums of money.

The master gives five talents to the first slave, two talents to the second slave, and one talent to the third slave. The man apparently gives the slaves how much he thinks they are capable of caring for.

Jesus' original audience was mostly peasants; they would have a negative view of the master. He is a rich man. People in the first century believed that there was a limited amount of goods in the world. The rich took more than their share. So the master has one strike against him already. The master is getting ready for a long journey. That would make him an absentee landlord. He would have acquired his wealth by lending money to peasants so that they could pay their taxes to Rome, then foreclosing on their lands when they couldn't pay back the loans. Strike two.

The first two slaves worked and doubled their money. It doesn't say what kind of work they did or how they doubled the money. The third slave dug a hole in the ground and buried the money.

It sounds foolish to us today, but the third slave was doing the honorable thing. Rabbinic law provided that burying money was the safest way to take care of someone else's money. There were no banks. Hiding the money kept thieves from taking it. Underground was the safest place to hide things. Finding buried treasure was not unusual. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that the kingdom of God is like finding buried treasure in a field.

The audience would have thought that the third slave was honorable because he refused to participate in the schemes of the rich master.

When the master returns from his journey, he settles accounts with his slaves.

The first slave was given five talents and made five more. The master congratulates him: "Well done, good and trustworthy servant." The master says he will put him in charge of many things. He invites the slave, "Enter into the joy of your master."

The second slave was given two talents and made two more. The master treats him the same way, congratulating him, giving him more responsibility and inviting him to share in his joy.

The third slave was given one talent. He tells the master, "I knew that you [were] a hard man, harvesting where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter. Behold, you have that which is yours."

The audience would admire the third slave. They would agree with his assessment of the master. They would admire his courage in speaking truth boldly to the master. They would think that he had taken the most prudent course by burying the money.

The master calls the slave a wicked and lazy servant. He orders the talent to be taken from him and given to the slave with ten talents.

An audience of peasants would be shocked by the master's response. They would not see any good news in this parable. The rich get richer and the poor get abused.

Matthew's revisions make it even harder to see the good news in this parable. Matthew gives this parable an allegorical reading. Jesus rarely if ever uses allegory in his parables. Allegory means that something or someone in the story symbolizes something or someone else. Matthew puts the parable in the middle of his Judgment Discourse.

Matthew intends for us to understand this parable as a vision of the Final Judgment. When the master settles accounts with the three slaves, it is God settling accounts with three disciples. The time that takes place from the master's leaving on the journey until he returns symbolizes the delay of the Parousia, the Second Coming of Jesus. The incomparable treasure that been given to the slaves is the gospel, which God graciously gives to the disciples.

Matthew adds the punch lines at the end of the parable. "To whoever has, it will be given and he will have in abundance. To the one not having, it will be taken from him." This is a traditional proverb, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Commentators consider Matthew's revisions to be an imperialist reading of the parable. Warren Carter, a New Testament scholar, says that the master behaves in tyrannical ways that imitate dominant cultural and imperial values and contradicts Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. The parable takes the perspective of the wealthy elite and legitimizes a rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer approach. It punishes the one who subverts the system.

The master commands that the useless servant be cast out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. The reward and punishment scheme is problematic. The point seems to be that disciples in Matthew's community should be bold instead of fearful or they will be thrown into eternal darkness.

Second Move: Taking a Second Look at the Parable

At this point, I was ready to give up on the parable. I was about to ask Mary to preach this week instead of me.

Instead of abandoning the search for good news, let us go back to Jesus' original parable. Perhaps he is teasing us into taking a second look at the master.

Jesus sometimes uses people with less than admirable qualities in his parable, such as the dishonest steward and the unjust judge. These characters would be viewed unsympathetically by the audience. The Good Samaritan is an example. Samaritans were despised by Jews. The parable of the Good Samaritan forced audiences to take a second look at their assumptions about Samaritans.

What of their assumptions about the master? The same parable appears in the Gospel of Luke immediately following the story of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. Jesus redeemed Zacchaeus is in the eyes of the crowd. Jesus could look beyond his status as a chief tax collector and see the inside of the cup. Perhaps he is doing the same thing in this parable with an absentee landlord.

There is nothing in the parable to justify the charge that the master is harsh. He distributed eight talents to the slaves, “to each according to his ability.” The master did not put an undue burden on any slave.

The master was generous with the first two slaves. He congratulated them and gave them more responsibility. The slaves would have been allowed to share in some of the profit.

By rewarding the slaves with more responsibility, the master would have reminded the audience of what the rabbis had taught them. “God does not give greatness to a man until he has proven himself in a small matter. Only then does he promote him to a great post. God tested David with sheep. God says in 2 Samuel 7:8, “You were found faithful with the sheep. I will give you my sheep that you should feed them.”

The third slave says that he knew the master was harsh and unjust. We have no evidence of this. His treatment of the first two slaves shows just the opposite.

The parable also challenges the audience to take a second look at the third slave. The audience would have presumed that he was acting out of prudence by burying the talent. The slave says, however, that he acted out of fear not prudence. “I was afraid and went away and hid your talent in the ground.” The slave works out of a false understanding of the master. The slave does not trust the master, even though the master trusted him.

The audience has a dilemma: how should I view the master? How should I view the slave?

The third slave lacks faith in his master. Trusting God means trusting other people. Lack of faith causes the slave to act fearfully. In other parts of the gospel, Jesus castigates the disciples for lack of faith. The first two slaves are faithful disciples who are confronted by a demanding master. They act boldly. They take risks. They stand in contrast to the third slave, who is paralyzed by fear. Perhaps we face the God that we imagine.

Third Move: A New Chapter in God’s Story

Jesus invites us to adventure. With a simple, “Follow me,” Jesus invites ordinary people to come out and be part of an adventure, a journey that kept surprising them at every turn in the road. They leave everything behind to follow Jesus. The sons of Zebedee leave their fishing nets and their father.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tell us in their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* that when we are baptized, we jump onto a moving train. We become part of a journey that began long before we got here and shall continue

long after we are gone. We are placed in the middle of an adventure that is nothing less than God's purpose for the world. The little story that each of us calls *my life* is given cosmic, eternal significance as it is caught up within God's larger account of history.

Our part of the story comes at a crossroads in Christian history. Membership in churches has been declining for 40 years. We can no longer pretend to be the Constantinian church that shapes public policy. That frees us to become the church that the New Testament envisions, disciples who draw their values from Jesus instead of from the prevailing culture. It is a new chapter in the life of the church.

This is a fearful time if we take the perspective of the third slave. We will cling to the past and resist any changes. The church will continue to decline and be less and less relevant to people's lives. The church will consign itself to the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is an exciting time if we take the perspective of the first two slaves. Step out boldly in faith and add to our religious inheritance. It is time for a new religious awakening. Perhaps this time it will be a great spiritual awakening. Christians will realize that they have neglected the inner work that brings them closer to the spirit that runs through all people and all things. That inner work will bring them God's peace. They can transform the church into a cloud of witnesses that actually remind people of Christ.

By giving up our hopes of political power, we can go about the work of actually changing hearts and minds. Political power by its nature is coercive. The political majority imposes its will on the minority. Americans like to say that we are a nation of laws not men. Passing laws does not change people's attitudes, not directly anyway. The civil-rights legislation and court decisions of the 1960s has not done away with racist attitudes. We have seen them coming back to the surface.

Perhaps fusion churches can bring people of different races and backgrounds together. Eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour in America. Most people who actually go to church go to churches that are all-white or all-black or all-Latino. A fusion church breaks down those walls. A fusion church is white, black, indigenous, Asian, Latino, gay, straight, conservative, progressive, young, old, middle-aged. Instead of being drawn together by their ethnicity or their sexual orientation or their politics, people are drawn together by Christ. Those are labels that we drop when we come into the church. The center of the church is Christ not the culture. People of diverse backgrounds get to know each other's stories and appreciate the experiences they have been through. Racism melts away as people come to see each other as sisters and brothers in Christ.

Conclusion

I hope we can build a fusion church here. We saw a glimpse of it at my tenth-anniversary service in September.

I hope we can become a training ground for people who want to do inner work and follow the path of the mystics.

I hope visitors can come and feel the presence of Christ here.

I hope that when people can ask you, “How was your day?” you can tell them about the adventures of being a disciple of Christ.

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