

Sermon
Matthew 25: 14-30
24th Sunday after Pentecost- A • Sunday, November 15,2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

WOW! Imagine being yelled at for not losing your boss' investment. Or, imagine being a manager and returning from a long trip and then walking into your financial planner or retirement account manager's office and screaming at her for NOT losing your money. I think if you returned home after the wild ride our economy has taken the last several months and found that you STILL HAD the same amount of money in your account, I think you'd drop to the floor and kiss her feet! I know I would.

That's a lot more than many of us can say about our investments, our nest eggs, our retirement in these last months and years! But let's unpack this gospel lesson and see what Jesus might have meant.

Jesus taught his followers through a series of stories, or parables. A parable is a brief, succinct story that illustrates a moral or religious lesson and often contains some sort of hyperbole to make his point obvious. But, two thousand years later, our context is different, and Jesus' point is not so obvious.

Instead, Jesus' language seems more like a series of riddles that turn our ordinary perceptions upside down and challenge our current understanding.

Talents were a unit of currency. It's hard to know their exact value, because there were several types. In the first century, one talent equaled 20 years' salary. Figuring a minimum wage of \$11.50 an hour, (which went up to that earlier this year), one talent comes to just shy of \$500,000, or half a million. That's a serious chunk of change. So 5 talents would be equivalent to 100 years' worth of salary, (or almost \$2.5 million)

The traditional Christian reading of this parable is that

conscientiousness in carrying out our duties is necessary to receive more important tasks in the future. We've also been taught that the first two servants are symbols of faithful discipleship even when confronted by a demanding master. Their actions contrast with the paralyzing fear of the third servant or slave. He has been characterized as someone with so much caution and cowardice that he broke the trust he was shown.

The problem with that is...

that in most cases, we really have no idea as to the situation that evoked Jesus' original story. We don't know the tone in which the parable was spoken, and have no recording of his facial expressions or body language and gestures. Did Jesus speak the words with a shrug, a sigh, or a snarl? All these contexts as they were originally heard, have been lost to us. All we have left of Jesus' parables is the written text – and even that was written down some 35-50 years later!

Here's another common problem:

Some scholars believe that the parable Jesus told was a take-off on an old Jewish story that reflected the Jewish understanding of God as stern and harsh... a man who bleeds the land dry, who expects to get blood out of a stone.

But to me, those aren't Godlike qualities! Is the owner really a stand-in for God?

Why do we always fall into the trap of assuming that king, or master or wealthy person in the parable is God?

What if Jesus never intended that God was the wealthy master at all?

Biblical Scholar, William Herzog, looks at Jesus' parables in a different light. According to his book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Jesus used parables when he taught his disciples for the purpose of getting them to think about God's justice and their own social responsibility to the oppressed. His stories expose the social inequality in their society that violate the teachings of the Torah. He wanted to motivate his hearers to live and work for peace and justice.

The landowners controlled the wealth. We know that the master in the story was wealthy because he traveled, (most people never ventured outside their own village) and because he had a staff. The staff included stewards, accountants, tutors and other related figures and was organized following a hierarchy. The most competent and trusted of these servants rose to the highest level. The higher the wealth, the more elaborate the household. The largest households were signs of power and wealth.

The head of the household could not afford to stay home if he intended to protect his interests and expand his influence. He'd travel to increase his investments, put together new schemes, build bigger networks, curry favor with other wealthy landowners. But to continue building his wealth at home, he needed to entrust important portions of his business to his household staff. Not exactly slaves, but very dependent on the goodwill of their master for their livelihood, and, wink, wink, they certainly could use their position to pad their own bank accounts. The trick was not to become too visible, but to remain discreet while skimming from the top.

The man's staff was assigned a task - "each according to his own ability" which could be translated to "according to his power or status." According to the hierarchy.

So, the opening scene has the wealthy aristocrat assigning to three staff people proportions of his assets according to the household hierarchy. It's unlikely that the master is testing his staff, as he would hand over his own money only to his trusted staff, who no doubt had already passed numerous tests. If it was a test, wouldn't he want to be there to oversee the process and evaluate the results? And remember, a talent, even for a wealthy person, was still a whole lot of money.

No instructions are given, no contract is made between the master and his staff, but much of that must have involved what was expected or other mutual understandings of the day. For Jesus' listeners, these would be understood, and Jesus, knowing his audience, kept these details unstated. Such as the knowledge that in the day, that returning a profit of 100 percent was the minimum profit accepted under the law.

But what was in it for the servant? Simply, "honest graft." Note that the first two servants go to work immediately and double their investment even though the master is gone a long time. They become passionate in their efforts to work the system to make the appropriate return for the master. But their zeal also reflects their desire to use some of the master's money to feather their own nests. Since the matter of the master's profit has already been covered, anything above that could go into their own pockets.

The master knows the system, too, and as long as his staff keeps watch of his interests and maintains a proper yield, he looks the other way. But he stands to gain even more by encouraging this process. Not only does the master get a great return on his money, but the retainers do his dirty work, exploiting others for profit, and they help to divert the peasants' anger that otherwise would be directed at him and the other members of the his elite social class.

Most of the times you've heard this story, you've been told that the first two servants used their master's money for good...but what if...

What if the absentee master looked for others who were exploiters like him to help him double his money by exploiting the masses?

You see, the elites used their wealth to make loans to peasant farmers so that the farmers could plant their crops. Interest rates were high: estimates range to 60% to 200% for loans on crops. The purpose of making such loans was not so much to make a large profit, but to accept land as collateral so that the rich could foreclose on the peasants' loans in the years when the crops could not cover the payments.

These landowners could have used their wealth to import and export, to manufacture, but they chose to exploit the poor. Of course, many of Jesus' hearers would easily identify with the parable told this way, because they, too, had to contend with this type of oppression daily. Their government and land was occupied by the Romans who taxed them unreasonably, and they were indebted to the Temple, but the lucky ones also survived by working in the same type of households depicted in this story. And if they couldn't play the game, they were exploited by them.

The day of reckoning comes when the head of the household returns. When the first two servants come before the master, they are rewarded as expected. They have calculated correctly; the 100% profit is pleasing to the master. Note that they don't say, "*your* money earned more" but rather, "*I* earned more." The praise they both receive masks the ugly tasks they have accomplished. But they are in good terms with the boss because they have proven to be effective exploiters of the peasants and have increased their boss' wealth within expectations.

But it's the third servant who is clearly the focus of the parable. Sure, he hasn't used the used the money to help the poor, but he hasn't exploit them, either. Instead, he buries the money in the ground. This way, he takes the best available precaution against theft and liability.

Don't you sometimes wish you had buried your money in the ground?

When he was questioned about his handling of the money, the third staff person describes the master as an exploiter who lives off the productive labor of the others. The master takes the lion's share of the harvest that others have planted, and he gathers in what others have harvested. This third member of the staff alludes to his boss' wasteful excess. He points out that the master believes that his wealth is his own, not a trust from God to be shared with the poor of the land.

The third servant's remarks serve a critical purpose. They expose the sham of what is happening in society and condemns it. He has exposed the lengths to which the master is willing to go to amass his own wealth. Finally, though, to cover himself, the servant returns to the master the money that is his. In his actions, he wants to show that he's an honorable person.

Immediately, he is judged. Having spoken the truth, the servant is vilified, shamed and humiliated so that his words carry no weight. Isn't that what happens today? An oppressive elite labels the servants lazy for the purpose of stigmatizing them and dismissing their criticisms. Speak up today, and if you're black, you're called a thug. If you protest, your actions are reframed as riotous.

But why should the hearers of Jesus' parable also condemn the third guy? Was it evil to return to the master what was his? Is it lazy to take proper precaution to safeguard the money? The elite master's comments are not to be taken at face value, as we have been taught most of our lives. I just think his criticism is included so that we

can see the master for who he is. A greedy man who exploits others to amass his own fortune.

And Jesus' hearers, most of them peasants, themselves, recognize this as an attack on a whistleblower. His honor refused to allow him to be a part of this corrupt system. He doesn't want to play this game.

So, instead, the whistleblower is banished from his home and his job and is thrown into poverty, because now, who's going to hire him? As a whistle-blower, he'll get no support from his colleagues, and as for the poor, they've only seen him as a part of the system that oppresses them.

The whistle-blower has no place to go.

The gnashing of teeth might just refer to the sound of the chattering teeth caused by being in the cold without adequate clothing or shelter, or the sound of teeth grinding when a person is in deep pain or anguish. Weeping and gnashing of teeth accompany those moments that tear life apart and change it forever. No doubt, peasants gnashed their teeth when they lost their family plots or had their livelihood stripped away. I bet the whistleblower gnashed his teeth.

For Jesus' hearers, and for us, this lesson poses critical issues: How will we react to the whistleblower? Would he be welcome in *our* town? In *our* church?

Where do we see this dynamic today?

Last month, Louis Clark, Government Accountability Project executive director, said that "Whistleblowers are proving to be a valuable, effective and necessary antidote to secret corruption on behalf of all of us citizens who seek assurance that our votes will count, [and that] our leaders will not improperly or illegally subvert the agencies of government for political advantage...In exchange for their courageous public service, whistleblowers deserve protection and the unqualified guarantee that we as a society will address their verified concerns."

This is a lot to chew on.

So I ask you, what might be Jesus' single, most important point?

To be brave? To support those who are?

To speak up? To expose the corrupt?

To help the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, the ostracized?

I'll leave that to you.

Amen.