

Date: November 15, 2020 (Pentecost 24)

1. Texts: Judges 4:1-7; Ps. 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: offering oneself for the community.
4. Aim: challenge, encourage.
5. Proposition: "This story tells us a lot about sharing ourselves with the community of the faithful."

PARABLES ARE STORIES THAT ARE TRUE

The Parable of the Talents is very famous and more than a little frightening, don't you think? It sounds so harsh! So the last steward was a little frightened. So, he lacked the courage to act like his master wanted him to. Is that any reason to shove him away into "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"? Really?

But here's something absolutely crucial to remember: "A parable is a story told by Jesus to teach us a lesson about God and his people, using everyday situations, sometimes with a surprise."¹ Remember, a parable is a story, a work of fiction.

So there never was such a frightened slave who was punished in such dramatic fashion. Jesus should have started this story with "Once upon a time, in a far away kingdom, lived a servant with very little courage." Then, we wouldn't be misdirected by our pity for the man.

This work of fiction, however, does have something to teach us, and it might help us if we figured out what that was.

Because of where Matthew placed this parable, it must be a "Parable of the Kingdom". That is, this parable must teach us something about what it means to belong to the kingdom of God. In the other parables of the kingdom, Jesus was talking about being prepared for the kingdom and the disciples' responsibilities to work in the kingdom. The disciple is to look at the circumstances around him and so recognize the coming of the kingdom. The disciple is to be prepared for the kingdom. The disciple is supposed to be doing the work of the kingdom.

¹ "Definition of a Parable", the Rev. Terry Leer, circa 1994.

That's what the other kingdom parables are about. Let's look at the Parable of the Talents as if it were continuing these lessons.

"For it is as if a man..." actually means, "For the kingdom of heaven can be compared to..." In the kingdom, the king gives his subjects tasks that fit their capabilities. They are expected to use their capabilities to serve the king in the midst of the kingdom. And the citizens of the kingdom clearly know both the king and his expectations. Should a subject fail to meet the king's expectations, it is not the king that suffers, but the kingdom itself. Because of the impact on the kingdom, the cowardice of the subject has terrible consequences and actually results in exclusion from the kingdom. That's the Parable of the Talents.

Now, we can figure out the lessons about God and his people that Jesus wanted to teach us.

Jesus had expectations of his followers. Being his disciple did not mean a life of leisure without expectations. His disciples are citizens of the kingdom of heaven and they are expected to do things for the kingdom.

God's expectations of his citizens are reasonable. God knows them better than they know themselves and his expectations are not beyond their capabilities. The disciples can do what God asks.

To refuse God's tasks out of fear is bad on two counts. First, it represents a clear lack of trust in God's assessment and knowledge. Second, refusing has terrible implications for the kingdom. Thus, to refuse to fulfill God's expectations is actually to exclude oneself from the kingdom—which is good, because the kingdom of God at the time of Matthew was under persecution. The Church needed each disciple to fulfill his or her ministry in order to ensure the continuation of the Church. But being excluded from the Church actually had terrible implications in terms of one's salvation. Matthew was certain that salvation could only be had inside the Church, and those who refused the tasks of God had to be excluded from the Church.

We have learned the content of the parable and the lesson Jesus wanted to teach us. The parable is a fictional story that teaches us about God's reasonable expectations of us and what the consequences are if we fail to work towards those expectations. A couple things need to be noted.

The parable is not a parable about success. All the third slave had to do was invest the one talent with the bankers. How well the investment did was irrelevant. All he had to do was fulfill the expectation, which was reasonable for him. The parable is not about success. It is about fulfilling the expectations.

The expectations of God are tailored to our circumstances. He will expect something different from a senior cleric with two university degrees and who speaks or reads seven languages than he will from a grandmother who never finished high school and has to depend on Old Age Supplement to make ends meet. God will expect something different from a computer geek who lives in downtown Edmonton than he will from a sheep farmer in Atmore. God knows us and he fits his expectations to us and not the other way around.

This doesn't mean that God's expectations won't stretch us. They may well. But if God expects us to do something for the kingdom of heaven, we can do it.

All that remains is for us to figure out what God expects of us. Let's try this on two levels: the level of our congregation and the level of our own personal lives.

On a congregational level, God clearly expects us to

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?²

[Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it:

² Micah 6:8.

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’³

[Jesus said,] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.⁴

It is clear that as congregations we are to figure out God’s expectations in terms of our lifestyle, our love and our effective proclamation of the gospel.

These clear expectations also work on a personal, individual level. We are to live lives that accurately reflect God’s nature. Our lives are to be directed by self-sacrificing love for God and for other people. We are to intentionally proclaim the gospel by word and deed in ways that other people can appreciate.

Of course, fulfilling God’s expectations will be different for every congregation and individual disciple because all of our circumstances are different. God tailors his expectations to us. But it is easy to know in broad terms what he expects and we just have to figure out the individual circumstances.

A parable is a story told by Jesus to teach us a lesson about God and his people, using everyday situations, sometimes with a surprise. Well, there was no surprise in today’s Parable of the Talents, but as soon as we recognized it as a story, we opened ourselves up to a very important lesson about us and God’s expectations. And for that we say, “Thanks be to God.”

AMEN.

³ Matthew 22:37-40.

⁴ Matthew 28:18-20.