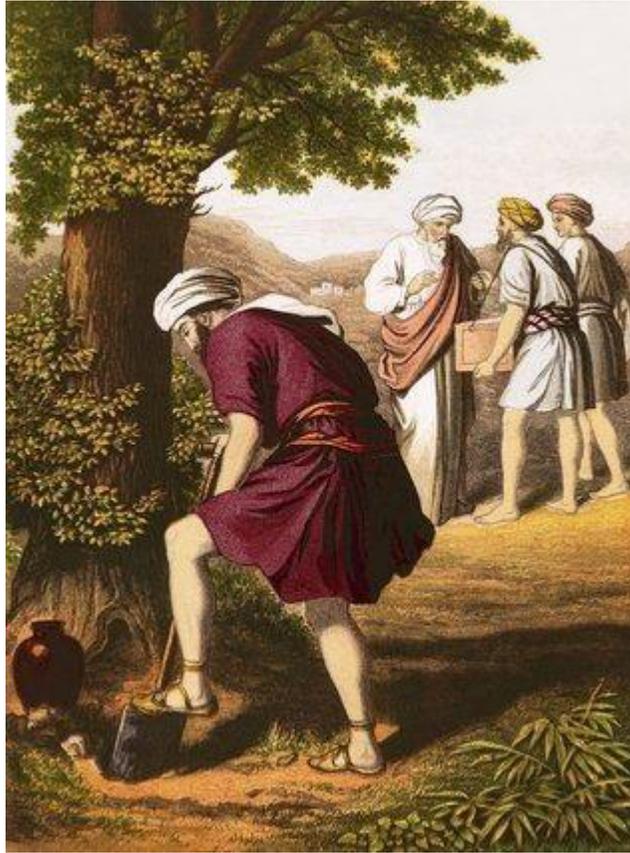


The Parable of the Talents



Matthew 25:24 "Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'"

The Parable of the Talents in today's Gospel is another attempt by Jesus to explain to his disciples what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. As with the other parables, they tell us something about the nature of God, and of ourselves. In this

story, God is like a rich man going off on a journey, who entrusts the care of his property to others while he is away. This Master is obviously very wealthy, but he strangely entrusts his property not to his family or to his friends or his fellow noblemen, but to his slaves. He must have had an immense sense of trust in them, since this Master delivers to his slaves an enormous amount of money. For one talent, just one, is thought to represent more than fifteen years' wages for a common laborer of that time. ---- This is a story then about a God of abundance, who entrusts his great wealth to us, his servants. And asks us to seriously reflect upon the question, what are we doing with the talents that God has given us?

By having this wealthy Master entrust his enormous riches to his slaves, Jesus also reminds us that what we possess is not really ours; we have no claim to it on our own; we didn't inherit it, we didn't earn it, rather we are entrusted with it by God; it's God's wealth we hold, not our own. The story reminds us that none of us really created the prosperity that we enjoy. Oh, we often think we did. We often feel entitled to what we have and think of it as our own, but so very many factors outside of our control really determined our fortunes, factors as simple as where we were born and when and to whom. We were blessed in this country. And the question in this Gospel story is what are we doing with our blessings?

For we didn't build this. None of us can create the soil, the seed, the water, or minerals needed for life, so we work fields that other people have cleared, benefiting from what others have built before us, like the roads or schools, like our freedom and democracy, like this building in which we worship. What we have is not really ours, Jesus is saying, it is the Master's and the Master expects us to do something with what he has entrusted to us, and not just to spend it on ourselves and feather our own nests. God cares what we do with our wealth --- indeed wealth was Jesus' number one topic of conversation --- and at some point, we need to notice that God isn't applauding our grand displays of self-serving and self-righteousness. God is asking instead **when** do we plan to invest his wealth and do some good in the world? When the Master returns, according to the story, he will demand an accounting of what we have done with the talents we have received. God expects something from us. God expects to see a return on his investment in us. God wants to see his generosity reflected in our actions; his goodness, his mercy, his compassion.

Jesus' strange Parable of the Talents in the end really turns on the third slave, and his defense for doing nothing with the talent he was given, of burying it in the ground and hiding it away. "I was afraid," he said. That was his defense. "I was afraid." And that is often our defense for doing so little with

what we have. We are afraid to gamble with what we have. We are afraid to lose it. Yet the Master was indeed a harsh man, who reaped where he did not sow, and gathered where he did not winnow, and the Master had no sympathy at all for this servant's fear and caution. He instead berated the slave, calling him wicked and lazy, scolding him for not at least putting the money in the bank and earning some interest on it. And in his anger the Master stripped this third slave of what he had given him and gave it to him who had taken the most risk, declaring that he who has, will be given more, and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away from him. And thus the fearful slave was cast outside, into the outer darkness, to weep and gnash his teeth.

It was fear in last week's Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, that caused the wise bridesmaids not to share their oil with the foolish; afraid that they won't have enough, afraid that they were going to run out, afraid to share with the others. Jesus isn't extolling sound investment strategy here and he isn't justifying the endless avarice of the-haves in this story. He was saying that the third slave jeopardized everything, from the Master's property to his own future, by allowing fear to dictate his actions. God doesn't want us to be afraid. God doesn't want us to live in fear. Fear makes us vulnerable. Fear makes us easily manipulated by others. Fear

makes us self-centered. It is no wonder that the one new commandment that Jesus gave was, "Be not afraid." A phrase that is repeated in the Scriptures again and again and again. Be not afraid.

Fear revealed the third slave as faithless. How can we be afraid if we trust in God? How can we be afraid if we worship of God of abundance, not scarcity? Don't we believe that God will provide for us what we need, that God loves us, that God cares for us?

If we live in fearful times, then the answer isn't more draconian methods for scrimping and self-protection. The answer is more faith. Faith in a God who values freedom and tolerance, even when diversity sets our teeth on edge. Faith in other people, as worthy in God's eyes whether or not we like them, or believe what they believe, or think like they think. Faith in ourselves, as a treasure to God. Faith in a future, where we live lives that bear witness to our trust in God to provide what we all need, and to care for others.

I have wondered at times if the Master of this story hadn't gone off on his journey to get married, for his temperament is remarkably like that of the bridegroom in the last week's parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, which immediately precedes this story in Matthew's Gospel. The Master here is not a man of compassion, he is generous and trusting, but he also is

hard and cruel, locking outside his door those who are foolish or those who are afraid. There is a harshness to both of these stories that is somewhat frightening to those of us who are trying to understand the Kingdom of Heaven and trying to understand where we fit in. In both cases there is a dire warning here that we better not be just sitting around waiting for the Master to return, but that we should be engaged now in preparation for his coming, risking ourselves now, risking what we have been given, sharing our talents, investing in our communities.

So what have we been doing with our lives? In what have we been investing our talents? How much of our treasure are we willing to risk? For Our Lord God has given us all a fair measure of time, talents and treasure, and we shall all be held accountable for what we have done with them when he returns. Many of us have wasted and squandered what we have been given. Many of us have spent it all, or at least most of it, on ourselves. Indeed perhaps we have even been wicked and lazy like the third slave in today's story. Most of us, however, have simply been afraid; afraid to really risk what we have been given. Afraid to trust in God. Hoping, as this slave did, that our Master will understand and have compassion on us when he comes home. But the message of today's Gospel, like last week's, is that we must do more than hope for understanding and mercy

from God, we must use those talents that God has given to each of us, in whatever measure, even if it is risky. We must not be afraid of failure. The message of the cross, in the end, is that there is no failure, except the failure to trust in God. Hoping for God's compassion and understanding is not enough. We mustn't bury our treasures. We must risk them and share them with one another before the Master returns. AMEN