



"Entrusted with Good News"

Scripture – Matthew 25:14-30

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, November 19, 2023

I'll take Confounding Parables of Matthew for 400, Alex.

We've been working our way through this category for a while, now ... A few weeks ago, we heard the Parable of the Wedding Banquet. You'll recall the man who refused to dress for the occasion; he suffered the same fate as the "wicked and lazy slave" in today's text. Then, there was the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. The wise ones were ready to welcome the bridegroom. The foolish ones? Well, they were off buying oil when the groom arrived, so they missed their chance to join the party. And, now, we move to the penultimate parable in Matthew's Gospel. The 400 dollar category: "In *this* perplexing parable, Jesus tells the story of a landowner who throws his servant into the outer darkness because he buried his treasure in the ground." What is the Parable of the Talents?, Alex? (For me, Alex Trebeck will always be the host of Jeopardy.)

As Jesus nears the end of his earthly ministry, his message becomes more and more insistent, and his parables become less and less palatable. He is re-working some of his original material; he's picking up themes from earlier teachings. But, now, Jesus presents them with the urgency of a man whose days are numbered. And his days are, in fact, numbered. In the very next chapter, Jesus will go to dark Gethsemane, where he will be betrayed and arrested. He has days — *two* days — to ensure his disciples are prepared to continue ministry without him. They *must* understand what's at stake! So Jesus tells his disciples a story:

There once was a man who went on a *long* journey. Before he left, he summoned his servants ... To one, he gave five talents; to another, two; to the last servant, he gave one talent. And, then, the master traveled to a distant land, without a return ticket booked. During his long absence, the first and second servants managed to double their money. But, the third servant — well, he buried his treasure in the ground.

When the master finally returned, he was impressed — delighted! — with the yield of the first and second servants. "Well done, good and trustworthy slaves," he said. "Enter into the joy of your master!"

But, the third servant — well, the master was not happy with him at all: “At the very least, you ought to have invested my money so that it would have earned interest!” And, so, the master had the third servant tossed out ... off his property and into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Like I said, as Jesus nears the end of his earthly ministry, his parables become less and less palatable. There is a *lot* about this one that disturbs us: that the cast of characters includes slaves (or servants — the Greek word could be translated either way); that the master condemns the foolish slave to a horrific fate; that the parable compares the Kingdom of God to a capitalist enterprise. These details make *me* uncomfortable; I imagine they make you uncomfortable, too. As with *all* confounding parables, the discomfort is an invitation. It’s an invitation to wrestle, to delve deeply into Scripture, to ask questions of the text ...

This is how we’re supposed to read parables. You see, the word “parable” comes from two Greek words — *para* and *bole* — meaning, “to cast alongside.” To cast alongside. *Not* to overlay, which is often our approach to parables. We try to lay one story atop another, matching up every character and every concept with some aspect of the Kingdom of God. But parables are not meant to hold every truth about the Kingdom of God. They are meant to be conversation partners. They are meant to be stories that invite us to *wonder* about the character of God and our place in God’s realm. So let’s dive more deeply ...

... *A man, [who was about to depart on a long] journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them* ... From the get-go, it sounds like a story about the importance of investing wisely. Heck, it could be a case study in a Fundamentals of Finance course. The lesson? Don’t bury money in the ground, you knuckle-heads! But, I would argue that this translation is misleading. It does the master a disservice; it does the *reader* a disservice! When we hear the phrase “entrusted his property,” we imagine the master turning over control of his estate. “You’re in charge of the grounds. You’re in charge of the house. You’re in charge of the books. Take care of everything while I’m gone.” But the Greek phrase is far more encompassing. In the fullness of the Greek understanding, the master is actually turning over everything that he has, everything that he *is*. He’s literally handing over his life’s work; the master is placing his legacy, his very worth into the hands of his servants.

The sums listed in the parable underscore the significance of this act. The first servant receives five talents. Five whole talents! This means nothing to us. But that first servant would have been floored. As a regular day-laborer, it would have taken him seventy-five years to earn that kind of money. This is no small gift; this is no small responsibility. The master gives generously, lavishly, sacrificially! The servants have received something precious, and it is not to be squandered.

So, it’s not particularly surprising that the master is upset when he returns to find that one of the servants has buried his treasure in the ground. What *is* surprising is the servant’s explanation: *Master, I knew that you were a harsh man ... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.*

I’m sorry, what? Which master is this servant talking about? Because the one he describes is very different from the master we meet in the first part of the parable — the one who gives lavishly,

sacrificially. The one who is still generous, even when he returns from his journey to settle accounts. After all, as far as we can tell, the master lets the other servants keep the extravagant gift *and* everything they've earned, and he even welcomes them into the joy of his household. So, the evidence suggests that he's an all-around good guy ...

It seems the foolish and fearful servant has misjudged the master. Rather than seeing the master's generosity for the blessing it is, the servant twists it into a burden. And, in doing so, he condemns himself; he pronounces his own judgment. As our friend Tom Long puts it, "... all [the servant] can see is darkness and the darkness finally engulfs him."¹ This story is not about a generous master who suddenly turns callous and cruel. It is a story about how the servants treat the gifts they have been given based on their confidence in the Giver.

When we cast this story alongside the story of Jesus' work and witness, we see some similarities between the master who gives lavishly and Jesus the Christ. Of course, Jesus does *not* give his disciples extravagant riches, at least not material ones. But he does give something precious — something far *more* precious, I'd say. He gives the good news of God's love and justice and grace.

Preaching the Gospel has been his life's work. And, now — at the end of his earthly ministry — Jesus is handing over this work to his followers. He is entrusting them with the care of God's kingdom; he's trusting that they will invite others into the joy of God's generosity and grace. This is no small gift; this is no small responsibility. The disciples have received something precious — ***we*** have received something precious — and it is not to be squandered ...

For goodness sake, we are *not* supposed to bury the good news in the ground. To hide it safely in the dirt — or, even, inside the church walls — until Christ comes again in glory ... To borrow language from earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we're not supposed to hide the light under a bushel basket. Far from it. We are supposed to put the lamp on the lamp-stand, so it can transform the darkness, so it can give light to all in the house. Jesus calls us to respond with gratitude — by multiplying the gift, by going out and sharing the good news with others.

When we cast this story alongside the story of Jesus' work and witness, we discover that this is a parable about what is at stake: What will happen if the church responds with gratitude, and multiplies the gifts we have been given? What will happen if the church does not? This parable invites us to imagine what may happen if we trust the goodness of God and, so, take risks for the sake of the Gospel. Or what may happen if we deny and decry God's generosity and grace and let fear and anxiety take over. It's a parable that invites us — perhaps, forces us — to reckon with the immense responsibility of being Christ's witnesses in the world. After all, we are the ones to whom the master has entrusted *everything*.

We are living in a time when it's easy to succumb to fear. Many of us have heard the news reports about the viability — or lack there-of — of religious institutions, especially following the pandemic. Many communities of faith are hemorrhaging members. Plenty of churches can't afford a full-time pastor. Some are even closing their doors. These statistics are soul-crushing to those of us who experience

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 283.

church as a place that stirs our souls and sustains our spirits. And they leave us feeling anxious about the future of our communities of faith.

The question the parable poses is this: How do we — as people of faith — respond to the gifts we have been given whenever the future is uncertain? Do we let fear take over? Or do we trust the goodness of God and take risks for the sake of the Gospel.

A colleague tells a story about a church that was wrestling with this very question.² This particular colleague, Joseph, works for the Presbyterian Foundation, which comes alongside congregations to help them build communities of generosity and, hopefully, ensure their long-term sustainability. As you might imagine — given the nature of the work — the Foundation often assists congregations that are struggling financially, congregations that are facing very difficult decisions about their future.

Joseph was at a presbytery gathering in Oklahoma when a woman came over to tell him the story of her church. She belongs to a small congregation located in rural Oklahoma. Like so many small towns in America, it's suffering decline; the kids all grew up and moved away, leaving lots of empty places in the pews. Giving was down. The congregation faced a difficult decision. Should they keep going and let the coffers dry up? Or should they take a risk for the sake of the Gospel?

As Joseph listened to the woman talk, he thought to himself: *Oh, I know where this is going. I've heard this story so many times before.* But, this time, the ending surprised him. The woman shared how her church chose to take a risk. They considered their calling as Christ's witnesses in the world. They considered the gifts they'd been given, the good news they'd been entrusted to share. And they decided to use their remaining resources to further Christ's work in the world. So they sold their building and moved into a storefront. They have used it as a place from which they can feed the hungry and clothe the naked. They've begun tutoring children in their community and helping neighbors connect with the services they need. And, so, their ministry multiplied. This congregation is actively building up the Kingdom of God. All because they chose *not* to succumb to anxiety or fear, but to take a risk for the sake of the Gospel.

Our circumstances may be different — as individuals, as a community of faith. But the call is the same. Christ has entrusted us with the good news of the Gospel — the good news of God's love and justice and peace. And, in confidence and hope, we are called to respond with gratitude. Not by burying this treasure in the ground. Not by hiding this light under a bushel basket. But by stepping out and lifting the light high. By using the gifts we have been given to ensure love blooms and justice takes root and grace multiples ... so that people throughout this weary world may experience the joy of God's generosity and grace.

² Story shared at "Discovering Resources for Ministry in Your Midst," sponsored by the Presbyterian Foundation, held on May 6, 2023 at the First Presbyterian Church in Springfield (Flourtown, PA).