Pentecost 24 Proper 28

November 15, 2020

Matthew 25:14-30

Many years ago, I worked for a man whose preference was that we learn by doing. He’d show us how to do something, make sure we had the information we needed, and then put us to work. He knew we’d occasionally make mistakes, but that was how we learned how to do the job right.

One day, I went to him about something I thought needed to be done. He turned toward me and said, “You know how to do this. You know what the right thing to do is. I trust you to do it. What I don’t understand is why you don’t trust yourself the way I do.”

Years later, those words are still powerful for me. The world was not going to end if I made a mistake. Nobody was going to die. He trusted me to do the job he had hired me for and trained me for.

But I didn’t trust myself to use my gifts the way he knew I could use them. I allowed my fear of making a mistake and the possibility that I might disappoint someone or get yelled at to guide me, instead of trusting what I knew I could do.

To a certain extent, I can identify with the unfortunate third servant in our parable.

Based on what we read in that text, the master was not the nicest guy. He doesn’t deny the servant’s accusations that he reaped what he hadn’t sowed, gathered where he hadn’t planted seeds.

Perhaps the servant was right to be fearful of what would happen if he lost the money entrusted to him.

But what if he wasn’t?

Jesus tells us that each of the three servants were given money according to their ability. The first servant got 5 talents, the second received 2, and the third received 1.

A talent back then was equal to about 20 years worth of an average person’s daily wages. This was not an insignificant amount of money.

It’s hard for me to believe that the master gave the third servant that much money if he thought the servant was incapable of doing something good with it, or if he thought the servant was likely to lose it all.

The master trusted that the servant could do the job assigned to him. But the servant didn’t share that trust.

Since this is a parable, we’re invited to find within it a better understanding of God.

I’m hesitant to suggest that the master is meant to represent God, because the master doesn’t deny the suggestion that he engaged in questionable business practices. And the judgment he offers the third servant at the end is pretty harsh, too. As I said last week, I don’t think fear of punishment, fear of God’s wrath, is an effective means of producing faith in a person.

But when we look at this section of Matthew’s Gospel, we see that this is a parable placed in a series of teachings that warn us about the second coming of Jesus and the end of the ages, and how we should behave in the meantime. There’s precious little here to offer much hope for those who do not come to have faith in God.

There are a lot of ways this parable has been interpreted, and when it comes up again in three years, I may have a different opinion about it. What I am confident about, though, is that the absurd amounts of money the master entrusts to his servants demonstrates for us the extravagance of God’s grace. That the servants were able to double that money and were then invited to enter into the joy of their master tells us that our efforts can multiply God’s grace in the world.

Grace that is hidden — buried like the talent the third servant is given — cannot grow and it cannot benefit others. Like the light of a candle, it is diminished by being concealed.

The third servant used his fear of his master as his excuse for inaction. “I know what you’re like,” he said. And so he acted accordingly. Rather than use the ability the master saw in him, he buried the money and claimed he was afraid he would make a mistake that would anger the master. He failed to be obedient to his master.

By failing to accept the invitation that the master offered, the third servant condemned himself. He buried the talent and ignored it. He declined the possibilities that might come through obedience.

Like the servant, we are sometimes afraid to use our own gifts, our own talents, because we fear we will make mistakes, because we fear we will disappoint others, and sometimes even because we’re afraid of what it will mean for us if we succeed.

If we believe that God is all about judgment and punishment, always watching over us and waiting for us to mess up, then we will respond accordingly. We’ll judge others, we’ll judge ourselves without mercy. We’ll bury our gifts and decline to share God’s grace.

But if we believe that the God who has given us these gifts is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, should we not act accordingly? If God is gracious and merciful, then we can take risks. We can offer grace abundantly and extravagantly, even when we’re tempted to respond with judgment. We can follow the teachings of Jesus that we read about in the Gospels — praying for our enemies, forgiving those who hurt us, refusing to seek vengeance.[[1]](#endnote-1) And we can use the unique set of gifts that God has given to each of us in ways that demonstrate God’s love.

This is an obedience of trust. When we trust that God is merciful and gracious, rather than imagining that God is watching over our every move and just waiting for us to make a mistake so we can be punished, we can act accordingly.

We are called into an obedience of trust, to remember that “the spiritual life is not simply what we think about God; it’s what we do *because* of what we think”[[2]](#endnote-2) about God.

Each of us has been entrusted with gifts by our Creator. When we bury these gifts — our time, our abilities, our treasure — we decline the invitation to enter into the joy of the discipleship to which we are called.

Knowing that we are freed by the promises of salvation and redemption, we can enter into the work God is up to – bringing wholeness and peace into this hurting and broken world.

May God give us the gift of faith and the courage to use it.

1. *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, volume 2. Matthew 25:14-30 Homiletical Perspective, Barbara Lundblad [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *The Rule of Benedict* Sr. Joan Chittister, p. 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)