

THE TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year A, Lectionary 33

November 13, 2011

Matthew 25:14-30

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Duluth, Minnesota

*The God of our expectation will be the God of our experience.*

Three weeks ago, I quoted from a recent editorial from the *Duluth News Tribune* where the author, Joseph Legueri, reads the first two chapters of Job and asks the question, “How can [Christians] worship [a God] who is capable of such cruelty?” I surmise that Joseph Legueri has determined for himself that God is cruel, and thus I wonder if his experience of God will be that God is harsh.

*The God of our expectation will be the God of our experience.*

In contrast, two weeks ago on Reformation Sunday, Jacob Carlson, one of our confirmands chose for his confirmation verse a very different picture of God, also from Job: “As for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. He does great things and unsearchable, marvelous things without number” (Job 5:8-9). I expect that Jacob, as he goes through his life, will experience God as he expects God: that God will do great things for Jacob, unsearchable and marvelous things without number.

*The God of our expectation will be the God of our experience.*

I have struggled with our parable for today for a very long time. I wonder: is it good news or bad news? I wonder if the answer depends on the situation of the hearer: do we identify with the first two slaves or the third one? If we identify with the first two, then the parable is good news; if the latter, then the parable is bad news.

The first thing to be said is that *the master is incredibly generous*. A talent was the largest monetary unit during this time, worth 6000 denarii, with one denarius worth a day’s wage. If you work five days a week, 50 weeks a year (assuming two weeks of unpaid vacation), then a talent is equivalent to 24 years’ wages. The master is incredibly generous. To the first slave he gives five talents, to the second two, and to the third one. The master is entrusting the equivalent of almost 200 years’ worth of wages to his slaves. The master is incredibly generous.

Not only is the master generous, the master has *high regard* for his slaves, who have been entrusted with the master’s resources. In biblical language, the master entrusts the slaves with the *stewardship* of the master’s resources.

The first two slaves see their master as generous. They invest their talents, perhaps even at risk, and the investment reaps abundantly. The third slave sees his master as harsh, so in fear he buries the talent so as not risk losing it.

While a talent in New Testament usage has to do with money, our English word *talent* derives from this parable, and our use of *talent* has to do with gifts and abilities we have been given. Our worship notes summarize our parable for today: “The parable is not so much about economics as it is about our responsibility to use the gifts we have been given to further God’s kingdom.” We might add, “for the sake of the world.”

Consider the gifts that God has given you. Now consider how you use those gifts for the sake of the world. Do you share them for the sake of others, or do you bury them, or use them for your own personal gain?

We held a working retreat for congregational members yesterday morning and early afternoon. Those present were invited to consider their gifts. One person confessed not feeling like he or she had anything of value to offer. Yet this person had only moments before shared having spent most of the previous week working with a local non-profit organization. The rest of us present also know this person to have a gift that is vital to any congregation. This person is in a key behind-the-scenes position in the leadership at Concordia as well as using these gifts in a profession that is helping support a family and serving the larger community.

I have said that our parable is *not* about economics—it’s not about money. But it would also be appropriate to say that our parable is *not* not about money. Because it *is* about money. Biblical stewardship is about *all* that God has given us—our time, our talents, and our possessions.

The first two slaves traded with the talents they had been given. The Greek literally reads, they *worked* with the talents. They *used* what they had been given; they were actively putting the talents to good use. In this way the talents were multiplied. That’s how it is with God. God blesses the work of our hands when we use what God has given us for the sake of the world. The motto of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is “God’s Work. Our Hands.” The first two slaves returned the talents they had been given as well as the blessing that they had received in working their talents. These two slaves receive the invitation: “Enter into the joy of your master.”

The *generous* steward is the *joyful* steward. The joyful steward is the generous steward. I have never known a generous steward who is not joyful. And I have never known a joyful steward who is not generous.

By contrast, the third slave did not *work* the talent he had been given. Rather, he buried it. In burying the talent, *he rejected his giftedness* out of fear. Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary-General of the UN who died in a plane crash in 1961, talks about *fear* in an entry in his book, *Markings*: “Maturity: among other things—not to hide one’s strength

out of fear and, consequently, live below one's best."<sup>1</sup> The verdict against the third slave was that he was wicked and lazy, and it is appropriate, as he refused to work his gift—he refused to share his gift, so that there could be no blessing. *God cannot bless what we do not offer.* God cannot bless selfishness. *There can be no joy for the third slave.* There is no joy where there is no generosity. The third slave *receives what he expects* from his master: the misery of his own selfishness.

I'm reminded of what Joseph Legueri expects from God: *cruelty*. By contrast, Jacob Calson expects *great things, marvelous, unsearchable things*.

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One biblical scholar writes:

The problem of the servant who received one talent and went and buried it is *not* its lack of yield, but how he imagined that his master would treat him:

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. (Matthew 25:24-25 [NRSV])

. . . Once again is it the subject's imagination of his master that is absolutely determinant of his behavior. One who imagines his master as free, audacious, generous, and so on, takes risks, and himself enters into a fruitfulness that is ever richer and more effervescently creative; while one whose imagination is bound by the supposed hardness of the master lives in function of that binding on the imagination, and remains tied, hand and foot, in a continuous, and maybe even an eternal, frustration.<sup>1</sup>

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Hear again the Prayer of the Day for this day: *Righteous God, our merciful master, you own the earth and all its peoples, and you give us all that we have. Inspire us to serve you with justice and wisdom, and prepare us for the joy of the day of your coming, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

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One last word: To be faithful to the God of the Bible as revealed in Jesus, I also have to say that *God is waiting to surprise us in ways we cannot possibly expect.*

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<sup>1</sup>James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: A Herder & Herder Book, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 153-154.

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<sup>1</sup>Dag Hammarskjöld, *Markings*, trans. Leif Sjöberg and W. H. Auden, (New York: Alfred a. Knopf, 1968), 89.