DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

15
Nov

Enter the Joy

It Will Be Like This

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

Whom do you serve? This week's parable of the talents may not describe the kingdom of heaven, but expose the kingdom of this world - one that rewards production over people. As worship planners, we're left asking: does our liturgy invite people into that anxious economy, or into the joy of a God whose love isn't earned?

REFERENCES

Judges 4:1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

COLORS

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Preaching Notes

Focus Text: Matthew 25:14-30

"Is it possible that Matthew is out to subvert that model of judgment by exposing its ridiculous nature? Most of the evidence suggests otherwise, but this reader wants to know." So wrote Greg Carey, Professor of New Testament, Lancaster Theological Seminary, in 2014. https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-matthew-2514-30-5.

I suspect other readers want to know as well. This parable is troubling on many levels. Yet it can also be seen rather simply, and most commentators and preachers tend to lean toward the simple interpretation: that everyone must pull their own weight. Everyone must work and produce to be a part of the kingdom. That's very Protestant when you think about it. Perhaps not earning one's salvation— we can avoid works-righteousness theology—but as a result of salvation. We work because we have been saved, not in order to be saved.

Perhaps more palatable is the use of the word talent to refer not to an outrageous sum of money, but to our inherent abilities or gifts, and to propagate the idea that talents are meant to be used for others, in service. This is Paul's argument in I Corinthians 14, where he says, "Since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church" (1 Cor. 14:12 NRSV). The purpose of the gift, or the ability or the talent, is to build up the whole church; it's not simply for the benefit of the recipient of that gift.

What is harder to comprehend is the harshness of the failure to produce that is presented in this text. Some argue that this is hyperbole and should not be taken so literally that those who are afraid or reluctant to use their talents will suffer eternal punishment. Others consider this to be the terrible consequence of not being a full participant in the life and work of a disciple. That brings us back to the works-righteousness question and implies that we can – or indeed must – work our way into the master's joy.

The other side of the call to produce and the blessing of those who double their stake is a tendency toward prosperity-gospel thinking, that God wants us to be rich and to amass wealth for our own well-being. Verses such as For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matt. 25:29 NRSV) seem to argue for that interpretation. Maybe, we argue, if we think about talents, we observe that talented people seem to be talented in multiple ways. And those who don't use their talents begin to lose them over time.

What is the evidence that Dr. Carey points to when he says the evidence suggests that this is not a supreme reversal of a parable? Tradition? Certainly, he is right to argue that for centuries, this parable has been interpreted as similar to the others in this chapter, and indeed many others in the gospel. It has been presented as a straightforward representation of the kingdom. It is hard to venture out from that tradition.

The parable itself reads like most of the others. There is a master, and there are servants or slaves in this case. There is uncertainty about the timing of the return, which is the main theme of this

whole set of parables that began in the previous chapter. It is hard to argue against that traditional formation.

Yet it doesn't fit the image of Christ we have elsewhere in the gospels. If the master, the one who returns, is the Christ, then this one seems different from the one we have come to know. The third slave knows him as "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed" (Matt. 25:24 NRSV). The master seemingly accepts this designation and then suggests that the slave should have broken the law to increase his wealth. Something seems off here.

The story also begins differently. Instead of saying, as Jesus usually did, "The kingdom of heaven will be like this", he says, "It is as if" (Matt. 25:14 NRSV). That begs the question, "What is it?" It is as if…? We supply the kingdom words, but they aren't in the text as we have it. What if the "it" in this case isn't the kingdom, but the way of this world? What if in chapter 25 of Matthew, we have a sandwich of sorts? We begin with the call to awareness, and we end with the call to serve the one of whom we are aware. But in the middle, we have a look out the window at the world around us. What do we value in our society these days? Who has power in our nation and world? What does it mean to be in the in crowd today? What happens to those who don't fit the mold, who don't measure up to the social standards?

"Enter into the joy of your master" (25:21) begs the question, "Who is the master?" And what is that joy? If the master is the harsh taskmaster who drives us to produce, to increase, to make, to have more and more, and to take from those who have little, then the joy is an economy that favors the "haves" and punishes or dismisses the "have-nots." But if the master is the one who says, "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest," then that joy is something very different indeed. Maybe the hard thing we are called to do is to risk being cast out of the systems within which we live and stand against a cruel and oppressive economy that values profit over people. Maybe, like the third slave, we can protect what we've been given but not use it to oppress others. Maybe the joy of the master can be found in smaller, relational, and less expensive ways.

Certainly, a message inviting us to use the gifts we have been given to help, heal, and create community is needed in our individualistic culture. But the joy we seek, the joy of our true master, is not found in what we produce, but in who we are in relationship with God and neighbor.

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