

Proper 28 Year A
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
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Judges 4:1-7 Psalm 123 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Matthew 25:14-30

Another Sunday, another parable! We are called once again to think about the characteristics of parables. They always have meaning in the time of their telling. They are deceptively simple and actually have more than one meaning. They tell us something about God or ourselves in relationship with God. It is common for us to ask who's who in a parable. And who am I in the story? Most often, the answer to "who's who," since we do not have one original bible, is "we don't know." "We" meaning me, you, and generations of scholars who try our best to make sense of an ancient world in light of the risen Christ. Theologian Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that we twist parables into tame stories in which there is no weeping and gnashing of teeth. Parables are not neat and tidy; they're messy!

But the parable of the talents is a simple story about money. We are familiar with rich, absentee landowners who leave their slaves in charge of their properties. Jesus teaches us about money, talents. Now, the devout Jewish person's practice was to bury what was valuable so that it would not be lost. Not losing the landowner's money is a good thing. If someone finds what you bury, you are not liable for the loss. If you carry valuables with you and someone steals them or you lose them, you are liable and punished for that loss. The Roman Empire's market of the day was usury, charging interest, and maybe even some questionable or corrupt business practices. Usury is against Jewish law. So in the parable we see: here are your usual practices, and here is how the world responds.

The story is not that simple. There is a huge tension here. Matthew's gospel was most likely written down in the 80s, after the Romans had destroyed the Jerusalem Temple. Christians are working through their core beliefs as Christ followers, separating from synagogues (being kicked out) and are under Roman rule. The landowner is the Roman Empire and we are the third slave. We're trying to live in the ways of ancient tradition in a culture that now says "double or nothing." Go for it, or you'll be kicked out of this kingdom. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for you who refuse to join in this world. As the third slave, we know that the landowner is corrupt. He has taken over the land promised to the Israelites; it is on this land that the landowner reaps what he did not sow, that he gathers what he did not plant. He's just decimated the Temple, the center of our life! The parable contains a huge indictment of the world "as is."

How did we get to that? Isn't the landowner God? Maybe. But God as the landowner who blesses the rich and punishes the poor doesn't fit with what Matthew writes about God. In Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, his teachings the new Torah. Jesus is going to transform this world, the usual, not perpetuate a harsh status quo. The gospel of Matthew also looks toward the future, the end times, and when Jesus will return.

This is a people who expected Jesus to come back within their lifetime – indeed, perhaps within a few weeks – and they have been waiting for decades. Matthew writes that we do not know the time nor the hour that Jesus will return, and that it might be awhile. Last week’s gospel reading concluded:

³Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

Today we begin: *‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey,*
Other parables have begun with “the kingdom of heaven is like.” Not so for this one. “It is as if... what is **“it”**?” “For **it** is as if...”. Could not “it” be the life going on today, the one happening in which Jesus overturns the usual while we wait for Christ’s return? Have we begun ignoring that his return is imminent? “The world is happening, going about, this way...” the parable begins. That’s how we get to Rome as the landowner. The present world happens this way.

Into this world as we know it comes Jesus, the same Jesus we wait for now. Really, this parable is not a simple story about money. **The parable of the talents is not about money.** There is a whole lot of hyperbole, story telling, going on. How big was that fish you caught? The deer? The killing you made in the stock market? By some accounts, a single talent is about six million dollars today. We couldn’t carry that much money, let alone dig a hole deep enough to bury it. Three talents, five talents – millions upon millions of dollars.

If the parable is not about money, and it is not, then we have to look deeper, to another level. What is this parable telling us about God or ourselves and our relationship with God? What is it now? We notice that the third slave acts in fear. Are you afraid? I am. I’m afraid my alarm won’t go off and I’ll be late for something; I’m afraid of inflation; that I don’t have enough – money, time, faith; I’m afraid that the stores won’t have the kind of turkey that I want, and I’m afraid it will be too expensive. I’m afraid ... you get the gist. What are you afraid of? (repeat)

We **know** that the Lord is coming. And we live in a world that is afraid; our fears, multiplied into sensational stories become “news.” The world is afraid. We are afraid that the banks will fail; we are afraid that the stock market will crash; we are afraid that the lettuce is bad, and that the stores will indeed run out of the turkey we want. We are afraid of so very many things. We are afraid that God is a mean master, and that we have to do everything “just so,” just right or we won’t get to heaven. Or we will be or are being punished right here on earth for our shortcomings. We do strange things in the face of fear. We might be so afraid that we take an enormous basketful of money and bury it in the ground for safe keeping. It won’t get lost that way. One talent is 6000 times a day’s wage, so we would be burying about 16 years’ worth of wages ... that’s a lot of money, a lot of burying. That’s a lot of fear.

But we know that our Lord is coming! When we live in fear, we are right there in the parable with the third man, assigning God the role of landowner and thinking of God as one of wrath, and we ourselves fall right into the hole we have dug, and we cast ourselves into an outer place of fear and weeping and gnashing of teeth. We forget Jesus:

⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

Awake or asleep we live with Jesus! Jesus changes the world. And the kingdom of heaven is inaugurated here on earth. Do not accept the insanity of the world. Take the abundance, the six bazillion dollars of faith that Jesus gives you and trade it for even more. The world needs to know that we have an Advocate who is Christ the Lord who is with us now. “The world” will not know Jesus unless we invite the world to know him. We must live in a way that shows that fear does not rule us; Christ does.

The world transformed in Christ Jesus is one in which, as Paul writes,

you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

Children of the light. How are we the church supposed to wait so that we might truly live in Christ Jesus? What do we do with the **gospel** as we wait for the coming of the kingdom of heaven? What do we do with *the gospel* while we wait?

Fear says: hold your faith close. We might not have enough. We better play it safe, even bury our faith in the dirt for safekeeping. They won’t like it anyway. We act as if the treasures of God are finite, when God is not a zero sum game and life in Christ is not a zero sum life.

Faith says: we build an ark. We will journey, even through the desert, with God’s people because God is with us. We will bear the child of God in the world, this world. Many days we concentrate on the “love your neighbor as yourself” part of the new commandment. Today we concentrate on the “love the Lord your God part.” We love in faith, not fear. We do not have to bury our faith, our hope; in fact, we are called to do the opposite. Fling that faith, our hope, into the world, and we’ll bring back more. We cannot afford to live in the ways and in the fear that the world accepts. We cannot save ourselves into sustenance, into growth, into new life. We live in a world in which God is active. We live with the sure and certain knowledge that God is with us and that Christ will come again.

Concentrate now on the encouragement that Paul gives to the Thessalonians:

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Fear not. Be transformed in Christ Jesus. For it is as if the Lord has come, and will come again. Amen.