

15 November 2020: Matthew 25:14-30 (Proper 28)

I once saw a young woman who appeared to have no soul. The young woman was in her late twenties; at one time attractive, even pretty, but no more. She was a crack addict and street prostitute. She was under arrest, in the custody of sheriff's deputies and not for the first time. If you could have looked into her eyes you would have seen—nothing: no spark, no life, no evidence of mind, or heart. She was a blank.

I served five years as a volunteer sheriff's department chaplain in North Carolina. I've seen accident victims, people severely beaten, those with gunshot wounds; I've seen high-on-drugs psychotics barely restrained. I've seen suicide victims. I weathered hysterical responses of family members when I, as chaplain, told them a loved one had been killed by accident, or violence, or their own hand. Yet the most terrifying thing I have ever seen was that young woman.

There is a saying in the 12 Step tradition: *there but for the grace of God go I*. We have all made choices that de-humanize, that do violence—physical, emotional, or spiritual—to ourselves and others. We have all made choices which somehow contribute to the world's turning away from God. It is hard to accept; we think we can ignore the whole subject. We think explanation is as good as confession; we hope good intentions for reform of our lives 'someday,' will be acceptable in place of the often painful road of surrender, transformation, and amendment of thought, word and action which must take place.

There is a tension and paradox with God's mercy and judgment. So, when we come to today's Parable, we want some satisfying diversion or at least comforting explanation.

The action of the Parable is easy told: a wealthy person entrusts three who work for him with part of his fortune. A "talent" was equal to approximately 20 years wages; therefore, all the slaves were given enormous sums. The money is not left for safekeeping but in trusteeship, for investment, as the actions of the first 2 servants show. The presumption of the Parable is that failure to productively use what is given is a dereliction of duty.

Do not allegorize the "talents" or other details; the talents represent the great value of God's kingdom and the significant responsibility it brings. As, in the ancient world, a master rewards or punishes servants for their productivity during his absence, so Jesus will hold His followers accountable for their productivity for the kingdom until He returns.

In the story the third servant makes clear by word and action that he does not want to use that with which he is entrusted. He wants to be rid of it. While we may pity the outcome for the story's third servant, he is not a victim.

This is a disturbing teaching, and Jesus meant it as such. Jesus often uses the strong language of prophecy, to shock and compel consideration. Jesus is saying, 'if the kingdom of God is about anything, it is about accountability to the will of the Father.' What we do, say, and think matters. It matters all out of proportion to our relative value. There is comfort in thinking that one's own little life—what we do to ourselves and others—is insignificant; then we do not have to worry about accountability or consequences or responsibility. We can live as we like. Jesus thinks our lives do matter; Jesus thinks that the kingdom of God can be real, in its fullness, in your and my insignificant, little lives. Obviously, this also means that everyone else matters, too. No one is disposal; no one is irredeemable. The choices we make, the actions we do, the words we share, the thoughts we think are used by God to move the universe a bit closer to the fullness of God's kingdom.

This is Good News indeed. We must embrace it and live it. Everyday we are faced with many choices of paths to take. Each turning can be further into the Kingdom of God, and each such turning builds on the previous one; likewise, each turning from God builds on the previous turning away. Yet ironically God, in infinite mercy, makes our turning towards him much swifter and much more joyous than our turning away. We may go far down the path away from God, yet if we just turn around, we discover that God has been trailing us the whole time, ready to embrace us and lead us back into the Kingdom, so that we may fully rely on His strength on the journey.

We are entrusted with great treasure—our lives, our faith (however faltering), the Kingdom of God our true home. With God's help, may the treasure grow in and through us. Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creations, for ever and ever. Amen.