

## 19 November 2023: Matthew 25:14-30 (Proper 28)

The parable in today's Gospel is a doozy! The action of the Parable is easily told: a wealthy person entrusts three workers with part of his fortune. One "talent" was equal to about 20 years wages for an average person; therefore, all three 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. This is a disturbing teaching, and Jesus meant it as such. Jesus used parables not simply to teach in the sense of imparting knowledge but as a means of bringing spiritual insight to his hearers. What insight is Jesus revealing in this parable?

We need first consider how the parables 'work.' Jesus' stories are not allegories—that is, all the characters and details in the stories do not represent people and events in the real world. Some parables have allegorical features, but most do not. For instance, the Parable of the Prodigal Son contains allegorical features, the Good Samaritan parable does not. Unlike fables, in which animals have human abilities such as talking, animals are animals in parables if they appear at all, which is rare. Neither are parables fairy tales: there are no strange lands and magical powers. The parables are not moral instruction in general. Too many begin with "The kingdom of God...the kingdom of heaven is like..." to imagine they are practical advice for living in the world as it is.

Jesus' parables begin in everyday settings—familiar to Jesus' first listeners. However, soon some strange or exaggerated behavior occurs, as when the vineyard owner goes 5 times the same day to hire workers, or when a shepherd leaves 99 sheep in the wilderness to hunt for one missing. These parables are not about labor relations or livestock management.

So, what is a parable? Parables are best understood as being constructed like a joke. With a good joke, the details of the story all serve the purpose of bringing about and supporting the punchline. With a good joke all the details 'fit' the punchline; bad jokes have superfluous details detracting from the punchline. Jesus' stories included dialog and actions that support the point he is striving to communicate. Therefore, speculating on this or that detail in a parable is not helpful to understanding it. Jesus included the details he did to support the punchline; he left out other details—however, fascinating it is to speculate on them—because such things would not build up to and support the point. In today's parable wondering what abilities each servant had or lacked, does not help us receive the insight Jesus intends. Deciding the last worker was dimwitted and therefore ought not to have been expected to do anything less stupid is missing the point.

One more point of similarity with jokes. The punchline comes at the end of a joke; Jesus also uses 'end stress'—his point is at the end of the story. Therefore, in this parable the emphasis is on the servant who did nothing with the master's wealth.

Through the parable Jesus is saying, 'everyone is accountable to God for their lives,' whether a person wants it or not. What we do, say, and think matters. We might think ourselves poor specimens of humanity, ill-equipped to be vibrant Jesus followers. There is comfort believing one's own insignificance; then we need not worry about accountability or results. We can live as we like, too inconsequential for God to notice.

Jesus thinks our lives do matter; Jesus thinks the kingdom of God is made real, in your and my insignificant, little lives. In God's Kingdom we matter all out of proportion to our relative value. Not only do you and I matter, everyone else matters, too. No one is disposal; no one is irrelevant; no one is too small, weak, or unequipped. Our actions, words, and thoughts 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 and live it. Every day we face many choices of paths to take. Each little turning can be further into the Kingdom of God, building on the previous ones. Likewise, each turning can be away from God. Ironically God, in mercy, makes our turning towards him much swifter and more joyous than our turning away. We may go far down the path away from God, yet if we turn around, we see God has been trailing us, ready to embrace and lead us back into the Kingdom.

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.