



Parables for Weenies

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Twenty-Fourth Sunday of Pentecost ~ November 15, 2020*

Zephaniah 1:7,12-18

Remain silent in the presence of Sovereign YHWH,
for the Day of YHWH is near.
YHWH has prepared a sacrifice
and set apart those invited.
When that time comes I will search Jerusalem with lamps,
and punish those who are complacent in their sin,
who say in their hearts,
“YHWH has no power for good or for evil.”
Their wealth will be plundered,
their households looted.
They will build houses and never live in them,
plant vineyards but never drink their own wine.
The great Day of YHWH is near and coming fast!
How bitter the sound of the Day of YHWH,
the day of the warrior’s war cry!
That day will be a day of wrath,
a day of distress and agony,
a day of ruin and of devastation,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of cloud and fog,
a day of trumpet roar and battle cry
against fortified towns and high corner towers.
I will bring such distress on the people
that they will grope like the blind
because of their sins against YHWH.
Their blood will be poured out like dust
and their flesh like dung;
neither their gold nor their silver
will save them. On the day of Yhwh’s wrath,
in the fire of divine jealousy,
all the earth will be consumed.
For YHWH intends to destroy—
yes, destroy—all who dwell in the land.

Psalm 90:1-12

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| 1 | O God, you have been our refuge *
from one generation to another. | 7 | For we consume away in your displeasure; *
we are afraid because of your wrathful indignation. |
| 2 | Before the mountains were brought forth,
or the land and the earth were born, *
from age to age you are God. | 8 | Our iniquities you have set before you, *
and our secret sins in the light of your countenance. |
| 3 | You turn us back to the dust and say, *
“Go back, O child of earth.” | 9 | When you are angry, all our days are gone; *
we bring our years to an end like a sigh. |
| 4 | For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past *
and like a watch in the night. | 10 | The span of our life is seventy years,
perhaps in strength even eighty; *
yet the sum of them is but labor and sorrow,
for they pass away quickly and we are gone. |
| 5 | You sweep us away like a dream; *
we fade away suddenly like the grass. | 11 | Who regards the power of your wrath; *
who rightly fears your indignation? |
| 6 | In the morning it is green and flourishes; *
in the evening it is dried up and withered. | 12 | So teach us to number our days *
that we may apply our hearts to wisdom. |

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

As to specific times and eras, sisters and brothers, you don't need me to tell you anything—you know very well that the Day of God is coming like a thief in the night. Just when people are saying, "At last we have peace and security," then destruction will fall on them with the suddenness of labor pains, and there will be no escape.

But you, sisters and brothers, are not in the dark. The Day of God will not catch you like a thief. No, you are all children of light and children of the day. We don't belong to the darkness or the night. So let's not be asleep as others are—let's be awake and sober! Those who sleep do so at night, and those who get drunk do so at night. But we belong to the day, so let us be sober. Let us put on the breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of the hope of salvation. God has destined us not to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Savior Jesus Christ, who died for us so that, whether awake or asleep, we might live together with Christ. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you're already doing.

Matthew 25:1-13

"Again, it's like a wealthy landowner who was going on a journey and called in three workers, entrusting some funds to them. The first was given five thousand dollars, the second two thousand, and the third one thousand, according to each one's ability. Then the landowner went away. Immediately the worker who received the five thousand went and invested it and made another five. In the same way, the worker who received the two thousand doubled that figure. But the worker who received the one thousand instead went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried the money. "After a long absence, the traveler returned home and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five thousand came forward bringing the additional five, saying, 'You entrusted me with five thousand; here are five thousand more.' "The landowner said, 'Well done! You are a good and faithful worker. Since you were dependable in a small matter, I will put you in charge of larger affairs. Come, share my joy!' "The one who had received the two thousand then stepped forward with the additional two, saying, 'You entrusted me with two thousand; here are two thousand more.' "The landowner said to this one, 'Cleverly done! You too are a good and faithful worker. Since you were dependable in a small matter, I will put you in charge of larger affairs. Come, share my joy!' "Finally the one who had received the one thousand stepped forward and said to the landowner, 'Knowing your ruthlessness—you who reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter—and fearing your wrath, I went off and buried your thousand dollars in the ground. Here is your money back.' "The landowner exclaimed, 'You worthless, lazy lout! So you know that I reap where I don't sow and gather where I don't scatter, do you? All the more reason to deposit my money with the bankers, so that on my return I could have had it back with interest! You, there! Take the thousand away from this bum and give it to the one with the ten thousand.' "Those who have will get more until they grow rich, while those who have not will lose even the little they have. Throw this worthless one outside into the darkness, where there is wailing and grinding of teeth.'

Whew. That reading is a doozy. For a long time it has been one of the primary reasons I have found the Gospel of Matthew to be so challenging, and my least favorite of the 4 stories of Jesus. But then I read an article by the great Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor which helped me see this parable in a whole different light and which deeply informed this sermon.

Many of us have long known that how we read a parable is dependent on who we are, what our life experiences are, what assumptions we make about the world, and what assumptions we make about the characters in the story. As I have said before any parable, but especially this one, sounds different to those of us who are white and wealthy than to a subsistence farmer in the deep south, or a person living on the streets of Philadelphia, or a woman in Guatemala gathering sticks in the mountains. And while I have intellectually understood this concept of reading scripture from a distinct bias, one that insulates me from its teeth, it has eluded me with this particular piece of scripture. I mean, it is clear, right? God is the Master (capital M) and the servant who buried the money was a giant weenie (something I can relate to)—too afraid to risk losing the money and ticking off the Master. Clear.

Jesus lived in a time when wealth disparity was huge—the gap between the vast majority of people who were barely getting by and the wealthy landowners was Grand Canyon sized. Actually, it had been that way in Israel for a long time: prophet after prophet had railed against it. Warning the people Israel that God was not at all pleased with the rich exploiting everyone else. But the wealthy didn't listen. Even after multiple catastrophes befell Israel including being taken over by one occupying force after another, the wealthy continued to hoard their wealth and mistreat the poor, and the prophets, like Zephaniah, continued to rail. And Jesus too had a lot to say about money. He talked about it more than he talked about anything else. Almost as if he knew we tend to obsess over it, worship it.

In one of the few instances where I have issue with the Bible translation we are using, the translators changed the word “talents” to “dollars”, and substituted “\$5000” for 5 talents. This dramatically undervalues the amounts of money discussed in the parable because in 1st century Palestine one talent was not only huge—weighing about 80 lbs, but it was a fortune—worth roughly 20 years of one person's labor. Only the wealthiest, those whose households were the economic unit of their time, had that kind of money. They got their money in ways we know; through trade, importing-exporting goods, lending money to people with few resources and options—say subsistence farmers in a time of drought, or people whose family had suffered a catastrophic illness or death.

Wealthy householders, the banks of their day, were happy to help out. If you were strapped for cash, you got the best interest rate you could, put up your land as collateral, and got busy planting and harvesting like your life depended on it. By the time you realized what 60% interest really meant, it was too late. Your land went into foreclosure, and in the blink of an eye it was not yours anymore. Of course, you could stay, as long as you were willing to work for your former lender—and if you could stand to watch your family's fields re-purposed as olive groves, or vineyards—something more easily monetized, that would appeal to a more upscale market at home and abroad.

And given that wealthy landowners often were abroad, it was customary for them to have “workers” managing the books and seeing to the day to day operations, taking a bit for themselves, of course, because it helped ensure that they kept tabs on each other while the master was gone. And it ensured the servants dependence on the master was built in—for them to prosper, he had to prosper and the better he did, the better they did. Their wealth derived from his. If he wanted to spend his profits on creature comforts and status symbols, there was no shame in that. It helped, actually. Like a good advertisement, it let his clients know how good he really was. Wealth was its own justification. Wealth brought honor. A master who shared a little venture capital with his workers when he went out of town was not only increasing his potential joy—he was inviting them into it as well. “Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have imitated me—you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

Which is where I draw up short. Why do so many of us hear the master in this parable as God-master with a big M. Haven't there always been a lot of masters applying for God's job, most of them really really lousy? Look at the the parable like one of the “little ones” who followed Jesus around, like someone living as a subsistence farmer, or people living on the streets of Philadelphia, and it can be hard to see the master as anything but one more millionaire sitting on a pile of money so high that he cannot see the bottom of it—which is why he has to hire people to keep it flowing up from wherever it comes from without troubling him with too many details.

As long as they can double his money, they are welcome to make it any way they like. As long as they can give him back twice what he gave them, they may deduct their “expenses” to the full extent of the law—which has been generously amended so that people like the master can go on stimulating the economy for the good of all. Really? We are seriously supposed to believe that the first two servants in this parable are the praiseworthy ones, both in this world and the next—for making a wealthy person wealthier, for keeping an absentee landlord in business, for scoring a 100% rate of return for him in exchange for

getting to do a little of the same to others—these are the guys who are doing it right, while the third one — the only one who buries the talent where it cannot do any more harm, the only one who tells the truth about the master (not behind his back but to his face), the only one who refuses to play the game any longer even if it means being banished from his master’s morally costly “joy”—he is the one whose “laziness” and “cowardice” have cost him “the opportunity for meaningful existence”?! Of course the master threw the third servant out! He could not have someone in his household exposing the truth “that he gathered where he hadn’t scattered, that he harvested and didn’t sow.” It was past time to show him the door. As for that outer darkness where there is “wailing and gnashing of teeth”? I have to wonder if that is just the truth about where whistle-blowers go once they have decided they cannot go on the way they have been anymore—that they would rather join the 99% in the dark than stay with the 1% of who burn through all the brightness without ever seeing those who foot the bill?

During the Occupy Wall Street movement, a town named Mosier, Oregon became the smallest town to join in. Mosier does not have a stoplight. The only gas station closed years ago, but a handful of people set up a dozen tents where they could camp together and talk about things that matter to them which included reducing the influence of corporations on local politics, supporting credit unions, and spending more money on health and education than on war. “People asked us if we were getting a permit,” Mosier resident Corie Lahr said. “We had to laugh because we don’t have sidewalks, let alone a city park where people could gather on city property for a protest.” Once the camp was set up, members of the Occupy movement invited members of the Tea party to come for tea and round table discussion, in hopes that the two groups could find places where their visions overlap. I have been trying to imagine Jesus dropping by Mosier—coming up to the people sitting in their camp chairs in front of their tents, eating food out of plastic coolers off paper plates—all of them foregoing beds and showers and flat screen TVs for the time being so they can brainstorm how more people might share in the wealth of this nation they love. If they had any eighty -talents, they were sitting on them. There was no one selling anything in this camp; there was no one buying. I have been trying to imagine Jesus coming up to one of them and saying, “I’ve come for my profit. What? No profit? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. Somebody take away the little bit they have here in Mosier and give it to those with ten times as much. For to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” I just cannot imagine those words coming out of Jesus’ mouth at all.

So maybe what I am preaching here is not a sermon about the parable of the talents at all. Maybe it is a sermon about how we read scripture—about why we are so reluctant to challenge established meanings, about what is at risk if we do, about what would happen if we stopped thinking of the truth of scripture as something cast in amber in an old, old book and re-conceived it as something fresh that happens every time we get together and let our lives poke at scripture until it yields new and living truth—maybe even something that would upset the (little “m”) master? Wouldn’t that be something?