

Do the Right Thing: A Minority Report on the Parable of the Talents

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
on November 13, 2011 at Peace United Church of Christ, Greensboro NC

Across the UCC today churches are hearing stewardship sermons and considering today's gospel lesson, most sermons today are going to go something like this:

Once upon a time there was a master who gave talents to three slaves: One slave got 5, another 2, and yet another 1. After some time, the master demands an accounting of what his slaves did with his talents. The first slave presents his master with 10 talents as he had doubled what he had been given. The second presents 4 as he too had doubled his apportionment. But the third and wicked slave presents his master with but the single talent he had been given. "Master," he say, "I know you are a harsh man reaping where you do not sow, and gathering where you do not scatter; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here. You have what is yours." The master, taking the talent gives it to the first slave and then throws the third slave into outer darkness where there is much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

And after retelling that parable, the minister will say something like: "You all have been given talents - some more and some less. The question is, are you using those talents? How are you investing what God has given you, or, out of fear, do you bury it in the ground? Eventually the preacher will invite the congregation to invest their talents into the ministries of that congregation and then to bring forward their pledge cards and perhaps, just perhaps, a few will have been inspired to increase their giving.

You know what? I've given that sermon before. There is, after all, some good stuff in it. One church I served could have hosted a day care center for adults in the early stages of Alzheimer's. They declined. The space, you see was used once a month by the 8 women in the Women's Guild. Another church, over 3 years said no to Meals on Wheels, a Senior Citizen's day center, a summer day camp for elementary kids with daily chapel services and a relationship with the YMCA. Why? Utility bills and scuffed floors. So trust me, I see churches left and right burying talents and bypassing opportunities for investment in people and ministries. I respect the preachers today who who will tell their flocks to stop trying to hoard manna and to step out on faith, because yes,... on one hand you might lose your investment. But on the other, if you do nothing you're going to lose everything anyway.

However, that being said, that's not what Matthew 25 is about. Most people assume that the master of this parable is God and the third servant is wicked. Why? Jesus doesn't say that. And think about it, if God is the master, then God has slaves. That's an interesting assumption. The text also explicitly tells us that the master is harsh and implies he is corrupt. So why would Jesus portray God as a harsh, corrupt slave-owner? That's right; he wouldn't.

Now let's talk about first century economics. The word talent is a word for a talent or 5 years worth of wages. So the first slave was given 25 years worth of wages and he doubled his return? Really? Do you know anybody who has doubled their money in recent decades? Probably not, but even if you have, where did this slave invest 25 years of wages? A CD at the People's Bank of Palestine? A mutual fund with First Roman Securities? And where would they have invested the money? Yes, you could have purchased somewhere around 1,500 rams or 700 bushels of wheat with a single talent. Multiply that by 5 and you've got a lot of rams and a lot of wheat. But what happens when thieves and predators take their share here and there? What happens when disease spreads through the flocks and blight through the harvest? So while a profit could be made, can you double your investment in wheat and flocks? Doubtful. Thus, there

seems to be only one logical explanation as to how 35 years worth of wages were doubled: they were stolen. Don't forget, the harsh and corrupt master reaps where he did not sow - what did you think it meant?

Now let's look at this third so-called evil slave, the one who didn't invest his money. Of course the master calls him evil. After all, he's the only one who did what the Bible says. The Bible explicitly condemns usury. It condemns making money by charging interest or by charging fees for the use of money. Sorry Bank of America. So this third and **faithful** slave does exactly what he is supposed to do: he neither steals, nor participates in usury, nor risks the money, which is not his, to the whims of nature. He buries the money as he had been taught and then is punished for doing the right thing. Remember folks: Jesus is telling this story immediately before he is going to be punished for doing the right thing. Of course Jesus is going to be talking about a man who was punished for doing the right thing.

Last week we started reading from Matthew 25 where we encountered the story of the foolish bridesmaids. That... introduction flows into today's parable of the talents and will conclude next week with Matthew's great judgment. There are not 3 stories in Matthew 25; there is one. In part 1, last week's sermon, we hear that the time has come for judgment. The groom has arrived. Have we spent our time and our oil well? Well, by what criteria will that judgment be made? How do we determine who has and hasn't been faithful?

Well with that introduction, Jesus says, let me tell you how the world will judge you and that's when he tells us the parable of the talents. Jesus says, the world values harsh masters and slaves foolish enough to embrace their master's values. Listen again to the words of the master in this parable: 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. If that's not describing our world then I don't know what is. It sounds like something right out of Occupy Wall Street because, whether or not we like their methodology, what the Occupy folks are saying is that the poor keep losing what little they have, while the rich keep getting more and more and more. In Matthew 25 Jesus says, Exactly. This is the way of the world; this is what the world values as success. This is how the world makes judgments on worth and value.

Now next week, when Paula preaches on the conclusion of this chapter, we will find how the Lord God judges. And what the Lord of Lords and the King of King is rather incongruent with what harsh masters and foolish but profitable slaves value. But that is next week's sermon, and I wish not to steal Paula's thunder. However, I would like to start wrapping up by saying this:

It takes courage to maintain your integrity. It takes courage and honor to do the right thing in a world that values people as commodities to be used, bargained with or thrown away. When others are profiting from "living in the real world" it takes something.... extra to hold your course. And folks, while not everybody in this room has the same theology, we in the United Church of Christ, WE are in the minority. We always have been.

- * We were in the minority in 1620 when the Pilgrims, our great, great grandparents left what they knew for a new land and a new start. They suffered much for their decision.
- * In a world of bishops and top-down hierarchies, we were in the minority in 1630 when those same churches started experimenting with a type of democracy called congregationalism whereby each congregation made their own decisions and hired their own pastors. They suffered much for doing the right thing.
- * Amidst an economy born on the backs of slaves, we were in the minority in the early 1700's when the Rev. Samuel Sewall published the first anti-slavery pamphlet. Eventually the rest of the culture caught up... about a century later, and even then only in the north. But we suffered much for doing the right thing.

- * We were most certainly in the minority as the first white protestant church to ordain an African-American man in 1785. His name was Lemuel Haynes and our grandparents suffered much for doing the right thing.
- * We were in the minority in 1839 when our women raised funds to legally defend the slaves of the slaveship Amistad. After they won, they stayed banded and became our foreign mission board; the longest continuous running foreign mission board in the U.S. But they suffered much for doing the right thing.
- * We were in the minority in 1853 when we ordained the first woman, Antoinette Brown, to the Christian ministry. Almost 160 years have passed and still our congregation is surrounded by churches who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of female ministers. We have suffered much for doing the right thing.
- * In 1972 the United Church of Christ became the first denomination to ordain a publicly gay man.

It has never been easy for us to do the right thing, and yet our ancestors, our grandparents have done the right thing over and over and over again and it is with pride that I align myself with them. We worship and live and act and minister within a sea of conservative, evangelical churches where women, minorities, divorcees and gays and lesbians are not welcome to share their gifts. All around us, others are doubling the size of their congregations. Around us there is no shortage of churches that will be considered successful by the principalities and powers of this world. But being successful doesn't necessarily translate into being faithful.

It takes courage to be faithful especially while others are successful. It takes courage to do the right thing especially when you are persecuted for doing it. Our grandparents in this denomination knew this as did their grandparents as did the third slave. And I trust you know this as well. After all, the good Lord knows Guilford County needs a couple of more spiritual houses where people do the right thing even and especially when it's hard. Amen.