

Imaginative Images of God

Matthew 25: 14-30

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time/ 13th November 2005

We're dealing with enormous sums of money here. At least eight talents worth, Jesus tells us, are doled out to the servants before the master leaves on a long journey. Now, what we need to know is that one talent is worth approximately fifteen years wages for the average laborer. This is a lot of money. To one servant the master gives five, to another two, to another still one, and then more talents to the rest of the servants based on their level of fiscal responsibility. We're dealing with an enormous amount of money. What would you have done?

Before you answer this question there are some more things you should know. One of the most challenging and exciting aspects of being a preacher and working with biblical texts is deconstructing worn-out and often harmful misreading of texts in order to free the story or the parable or a collection of verses from their historical, cultural, even psychological baggage so that we might hear more clearly what the Spirit is trying to say through them.

This text is a marvelous case in point. What catches your ear or eye in this parable? We hear the word "talents" and then need to figure out what "talent" means: fifteen years wages for the average laborer. Fine. But surely Jesus doesn't expect us to use our annual salaries this way, to this extreme. Maybe what Jesus is trying to tell us is that we have to be faithful stewards with whatever gifts come our way. Some have a little; some have a lot, but each have a responsibility. Then we can pare the story down even more, tame it, and try to make it more palatable – because as it stands, this parable is extremely disturbing. So we might say that this text really isn't about money, because God doesn't care about money – it's so unspiritual – and Christians don't have to worry about money, but so-called spiritual things like 'love' or 'mercy' or 'forgiveness.' It says "talent" and we tend to link "talent" with stewardship talk, as in stewardship of time, money, and talent, which sometimes means I don't have to give as much money to the church because I give a lot of my time and I share my gifts and talents instead. And when we hear "talents" we think of being able to play the piano or possessing artistic skills, or we think of people like Chuck Kreis who can play the kazoo (as we know from last week). So we

are led to believe that this is the point of the parable: Jesus wants us to use all our talents wisely. What a nice little lesson.

Of course, using our gifts and talents wisely is a good thing. Who could be against this? But there's more going on here. As therapists know, when a couple argues over money they're not only arguing over money, but something else. *And even though Jesus is talking about money here he's really talking about something else, that when embraced will inform the way a Christian approaches everything, including money.* You see, before we get to an interpretation of scripture we must try to be aware of what we're bringing to any reading – no one reads scripture objectively. And so we ask, what are the presuppositions or perspectives or fears or theological beliefs that we use as a filter with any given text? It is sort of like a Rorschach test, or ink-blot test that psychologists use for diagnosis. How one sees the blotch of ink says more about the observer than the ink; how we read scripture often says more about the reader than about the text. The challenge, however, is to read scripture and hear *God's* word, not merely an echoing back of what we think the text is saying. We need to listen for God's word through the words.

For example, in this parable, it's funny how we focus in on the money, we hone right in on it, we focus on the "talent," how it's saved or invested for lesser or greater gain. An initial hearing or reading of this text probably makes us nervous because we know how much money we have. The fact that we tune into the financial transactions in the parable might say more about us, might reflect our own degree of anxiety, unease, maybe even guilt when it comes to money and our faith. It might speak to our ambiguous relationship with money, grateful for how much we have, nervous about losing it, maybe knowing we should give more of it away or spend it differently. I think Americans in general and American-Christians in particular are conflicted when it comes to our treasure; it's a real challenge for American-Christians. It's amazing how often we come with all kinds of excuses about how much we don't have.

But the talent or treasure in this parable is not what the world cherishes or values. This is a parable and at the center of all Jesus' parables is the kingdom of God, and the talent or treasure that stands at the heart of this story is the gospel – *the announcement of God's good news for the world is found in Jesus Christ and with the advent of his kingdom.* Which is another way of saying this parable is not offered as a moralizing story so we figure out how we have to obey in order to receive God's favor. This parable is less about the moral character of the servants (understood as disciples) than it is about the nature and purpose of *God.* The

parable is about *God* – Jesus is concerned with the way we imagine God. Jesus wants us to see who God really is and make sure our images of God are worthy of the God who has called us out of darkness into God’s glorious light. We get the kind of God we imagine.

Notice that the master is really an extraordinary person – trusting, welcoming, generous and benevolent beyond belief.¹ He’s going away on a journey and entrusts his treasures with this servants. The first two servants see the master as generous and benevolent, trusting. Because they trust the generosity of the master they are free to take risks. But the third servant says when the master returns, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” Amazing. “I knew that you were a harsh man...” How did the servant know that? “I was afraid,” he said. And in fear he recoiled and held back, not unlike Adam in the garden who in fear made terrible choices. Why does the servant assume the master is so cruel? Where did he learn this?

You see, there’s a connection between the way we imagine God and the way we live our lives. The one-talent servant badly misjudged the character of God, distorting God into a tough, uncaring despot, and then acted foolishly. He assumed his master – read, *God* – was tough, cruel, demanding, so exacting that he is paralyzed with fear that he just buries what he has and eagerly waits to give it back to God, to get it out of his hands with his life intact. He’s so afraid of taking risks because envisions a fearful God. But the other two servants didn’t view the master – read, *God* – that way, did they? The contemporary theologian James Alison makes the important point that “the subject’s imagination of his master...is absolutely determinant of his behavior. One who imagines his master as free, audacious, generous, ...takes risks, and himself enters into a fruitfulness that is ever richer and more effervescently creative; while one whose imagination is bound by the supposed hardness of the master lives in function of that binding imagination, and remains tied, hand and foot, in a continuous, and maybe even an eternal, frustration.”² The binding imagination hinders us, holds us back.

As Tom Long writes in his commentary on Matthew, “The tragic news of this parable is that the one-talent man pronounces his own judgment; he gets only the master his tiny and warped and vision can see.” He gets the God he

¹ Thomas Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 283.

² James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovering of Eschatological Imagination* (London: Herder & Herder, 2000), pp. 153-154.

believes in and so do we. “If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life and can discover the joy of God’s providence... But to be a child of the generous, gracious, and life-giving God and, nonetheless, to insist upon viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished.”³

Jesus knows he is close to death. He knows that disciples will have to continue on with his work. He wants them to know how to use the treasure entrusted to them. He also wants them – and he wants us – to know the kind of God who entrusts this work with us. There is here a kind of “theological economy” at work, as Tom Long suggests, a theological economy in which Jesus wants us to see that this is how the world really works.⁴ “For those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, they find more and more of that generosity; but for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life spent under the bed alone, quivering in needless fear.” It is very often our skewed images and constricted imaginations that hinder and hurt us terribly, that lead to all kinds of cruelty and sorrow and needless suffering. Ann Ulanov, the Jungian analyst and professor of psychiatry and religion at Union Seminary, New York, writes about the way imagination can liberate, of the power of imagination “constantly function[ing] to push away the preconceptions and subjective God-images we have so ceaselessly created, so that we can see afresh the God who is about to arrive,” that is the God who wants to be known free from the distorted human images and human neuroses that hinder us from have healthy visions of God.⁵ We need our *imaginations redeemed* as much as our souls and bodies.

Images of a fearful, critical, scolding, judging God produce people who are fearful and critical and scolding and judging. God as restrictor produces restricting people who also love to restrict others – and produces people who are usually very angry!

But, a generous God generates generous people. God conceived as benevolent fashions a benevolent people. God understood as trustworthy forms trusting people who are eager to share. And when we’re not fearful, we’re able to take healthy risks, to venture out, allowing ourselves to be creative, imaginative, “effervescent,” investing our talents and yielding abundant fruit. *The images of*

³ Thomas G. Long, p. 283.

⁴ Long, p. 283.

⁵ Ann Belford Ulanov, *Finding Space: Winnicott, God, and Psychic Reality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 123.

God we receive from Jesus enlarge our hearts and expand our minds, the kind of big hearts and open minds that the gospel requires, the kind of big hearts and open minds needed in disciples to care for the treasure entrusted to us.

How are going to be “good and faithful” stewards of what has been entrusted to us? That’s the question. It’s remarkable that Jesus doesn’t provide clear-cut answers, no examples of theological correctness or strict obedience to clear instructions, but active responsibility that takes initiative and risk. The master gives no clear instructions and so we must decide how we are to use all God gives us.

But the way we use what has been given us – whether in a spirit of generosity and risk or careful miserliness – has to do less with an act of will, than in the healing of our twisted images of God. In other words Jesus doesn’t give us a list of Do’s and Don’ts, but turns our attention to God, to our images of God. Look at God – then you’ll know what to do. Because you have come to know in Christ that God is graceful and generous, rich in mercy and benevolent, faithful and trustworthy, seeking the welfare of all people, because you – *disciple of Jesus Christ!* – know this, you know what God requires.

So, how then are you going to respond? What kind of graceful, generous response do you find welling up within your soul? What kind of merciful act, benevolent act, what kind of faithful, risk-taking-because-God-is-trustworthy act do you feel God calling you to do?

To one servant the master gives five, to another two, to another still one, and then more talents to the rest of the servants based on their level of responsibility. What are you doing with your “talent”? What’s your image of God?

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