

Getting Ready

There are many ways to approach today's Gospel text. It is a continuation from last week's text where we heard the parable of the Wise and Foolish Bridesmaids. To put this reading into context, it is part of the last teaching discourse that Jesus gave to the disciples before His crucifixion. This was taught by Jesus in the time between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday on Mount Olivet. It began when the disciples noticed all the beautiful stones that were used to construct the Temple and the city when they were leaving the city one day. Jesus started talking about the fact that none of those stones would be left standing and after the disciples asked Him when it would happen, Jesus began teaching them about the end of times and the coming judgement. Many of these teachings, like the texts from last week and today are in parables.

Last week, Jesus gave a parable about the end of times and continues that theme in today's reading. The major theme of last week's parable is about waiting and watching. Today's text is the sequel to last week text, giving an example of how we are to wait and watch. Doing a sequel is always risky, knowing full well that the sequel isn't always as good as the first one.

Traditionally, this parable, The Parable of the Talents, is used to show various themes. One of these themes is to show how we are supposed to use our abilities given to us. Another theme illustrates the justice and fairness of God to those who do not use their talents wisely or to best of their ability. A third theme shows how we are given the gift of the Gospel by God and we should use our other gifts if not wisely, then at least try something to extend the Gospel to others. A fourth theme would illustrate how if we are faithful, we will be 'rewarded' with more blessings. Typically, these blessings are of a financial nature. We've all heard inspirational sermons on these

themes, or variations of them, which gave us insight into this difficult parable and made a difference in our lives, even if we may not necessarily be aware of it.

However, there are many issues and questions that are raised in the traditional interpretations of this parable.

First among these would be if each slave was given according to their ability, then the master didn't expect much from the third slave from the start. It could be argued that even though he didn't put it in the bank, by burying it, at the least, he kept the original sum of money - he didn't lose anything.

When we take into consideration the views about wealth in 1st Century, we do not see a good picture of God. It was believed that there was a limited amount of wealth and if you got more wealth, that meant you took it from someone else, generally by underhanded means. So, if the master represents God, then God is not necessarily presented in a good light. The image of a rich master would conflict with the image of a forgiving, benevolent God. While the third slave alleges that the rich man is devious and dishonest, the rich man does not dispel this image, but uses to say that the 3rd slave should have done something more than bury it out of fear.

There are more troublesome points, but this sermon is not about looking into the details of the parable and then picking it apart. Instead, let's look at it as a mosaic piece, part of a bigger picture that is presented in this part of Jesus' discourse. If we look at Jesus' parables too closely, too up-close, we might mistake what we see. It is like the skit that Jay Leno used to do on the Tonight Show where he would show an up-close picture of something and then we had to guess what it was. Something looked like an eye may have actually been a button on a shirt. Looking at something too closely does not always give us more detail or information about what we are looking at.

That said, we need to accept some starting conditions, somewhat like a geometry proof. These starting conditions can be ascertained from other parts of the Gospels as well as throughout the Bible as a whole. Let's start with the fact that God did not send Jesus to be the Messiah in the way that people were expecting. The image of the Messiah that people were expecting derived from the paradigm of power over others. This is how the world operated and was experienced by the Jewish people. However, coming as a Messiah to redeem people from sin and death, Jesus shifted that paradigm to a new paradigm, a new way of relating with each other. Rather than based on the law and power over others, Jesus' way is based upon love, beginning with God's love for His creation.

The picture we get of Jesus in the Gospels is someone who does not place an overwhelming emphasis on monetary wealth and accumulation of wealth. Examples of this are the parable of the man who built bigger barns for his harvest and Jesus telling the rich young man to sell all his belongings and give them away before he can follow Jesus. He holds up the widow who put in her only coin into the offering box as a better steward than the Pharisee who gave out of his abundance. Jesus routinely associated with those who had little, the lower economic classes, those who were on the fringes of society.

When we factor in these aspects of Jesus' character and teachings, perhaps with this parable, Jesus is showing us the absurdity of a system based on anything other than the love of God. The absurdness comes from seeing that even with an enormous amount of wealth, it wasn't enough for the master, he wanted more. The slaves weren't valued for who they were, only for what they were able to make for the master. This is totally opposite to the way Jesus lived and taught.

As with any parable by Jesus, different meanings can be derived from them. While there are limitations in interpreting this parable in the traditional way, there are

still lessons to be learned when we hear this parable in this manner. By hearing this parable in the traditional manner, we see that it is important to be in relationship with others. The slaves who traded and doubled the talents given to them interacted with others. The third slave only buried the talent given him and didn't even enter into a minimal relationship with the bankers. So, in conjunction with last week's parable of the bridesmaids, we see that part of that watching and waiting is to be in relationship with others. It is elsewhere in the Bible and Gospels do we learn what kind of relationships we should be in.

As we continue to the end of the church year, which ends next week with Christ the King Sunday, where we acknowledge the sovereignty of Jesus as our King who will come again to judge the world, may we focus on our preparations for this second coming, preparations that take us closer to being like Jesus, especially in the way we relate to others, seeing them as God sees them with eyes of love and compassion.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon:

Service: