

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 16, 2014
Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-8
I Thessalonians 5:1-10
Matthew 25:14-15, 19-29

Our Gospel lesson this morning finds Jesus telling the third in a series of parables centered on the theme of *watchfulness*. As Jesus tells this parable, he is only a few days away from giving his life on the cross, where he will demonstrate just how far God will go to communicate God's love for us and for all the world.

The story involves a wealthy landowner who is preparing to go on a long trip, and who entrusts his wealth to three of his servants in his absence. When he returns, the three servants are called to give an account of their stewardship of what was entrusted to them.

The traditional view of this story identifies the master of the estate as Jesus, and the long journey he takes is seen as the time between his ascension to the Father and his second coming.

The "talents" that the master entrusts to his servants have been interpreted in many ways. In a prior sermon on this text I have shared with you my belief that the "talents" or treasure alluded to here is not so much money, resources, skills, or

abilities, but rather the *Gospel message*. Days away from his death, Jesus now entrusts to his servants the Kingdom work he has been doing.

And if last week's parable of the bridesmaids admonished Jesus' followers to be *watchful* about his return, today's parable pushes the issue a bit further. Not only are Jesus' followers to be *watchful* – they are to be watchful with an active, *risk taking approach to sharing the Gospel and carrying on his work*. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that we could summarize the traditional view of this parable in this short sentence: ***Get useful, or face judgment.***

This works well for two of the servants in the story, but is problematic for the third servant. To say that the master is hard on him is, well – an understatement.

There is a big part of me that identifies with this third servant. Given what we've experienced in the modern era, as recently as 2008, there are many who would argue that what this man did constituted prudent financial management in the face of highly uncertain times.

On top of that, there was Rabbinic teaching that approved of what the third servant did also being prudent. So as I read the story again this week, I could not help but ask myself: *Where did this third servant go wrong? Where did everything go south?*

Was the third servant's failure the fact that he did not *succeed*? Or was his failure the fact that he *did not try*?

I would submit to you this morning that *neither* of the above answers really satisfies. I wonder if another possibility might exist. I wonder if the third servant's failure consisted in the fact that *his perception of the master was all wrong*.

Notice how deeply affected the third servant is by his *perception* of the master of the estate. "Master," he says, "I *knew* you were a harsh man, harvesting crops you didn't plant and gathering crops you did not cultivate."

But there is no hint of this earlier in the story. Neither the first nor the second servant voice this concern or affirm this feeling, and the landowner himself neither confirms this assessment or calls it into question.

What the Master *does* is respond with a question: "You think I'm a hard man, do you? Well if I'm so hard, why didn't you adopt a different strategy?"

And at this point, it almost seems like the Master's response becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. He decides to act in just the way the third servant has characterized him. What happens here to the third servant mirrors much of *our* life experience. That is, *we often see just what we are looking for*. Perception becomes reality.

Is it possible that what happened to this third servant can also happen to us in our relationship with God? If I gave each of you a piece of paper this morning with the words, “God, I know you to be _____,” how would you fill in the blank?

Another question: Does the picture of God that you carry with you in your mind match the picture of God that comes to us in Jesus? Or has that picture been shaped by other events and circumstances in your life?

I readily confess that the traditional understanding of this parable has much to commend it. The notion that followers of Jesus are to be *watching* for his return by not playing it safe and by aggressively taking risks as they seek to share the Gospel makes a lot of sense.

But it is this very view of the parable that also makes it problematic for me. For if the Master in the story is Jesus, the picture that emerges of him is, for me, downright negative. Jesus comes off looking like a cold-hearted, calculating, legalistic, bottom line cutthroat. Produce and bear fruit, or you’re out on your ear! For years I labored under the assumption that Jesus called his followers to be *faithful*, not *successful*. Perhaps I was wrong. Now I’m left trying to reconcile this picture of Jesus with what I encounter of him in other parts of the New Testament, and it’s a bit of a struggle for me.

I also wonder about the first two servants. What was it about their *perception* of the Master that enabled them to take the risks that they took? And what would have been the Master's response to them had they *lost* all that was entrusted to them?

The Gospel is an invaluable treasure. It is a priceless, life-changing message. It is a great light that cannot be hidden under the proverbial bushel. Shining this light into a needy and hurting world is risky. It is fraught with peril and pain. It is costly on many levels. Yet by God's grace, it is a risk worth taking.

And as we do, I'd like to think that on the other end of our efforts is a Savior who looks at our *motives*, not just our *bottom lines*. My fervent prayer and hope is that the words "well done," are not reserved solely for those who are *successful*, but also to those who attempt to be *faithful* with what they've been given – even when they fail.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.