

Sermon preached at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, CT

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Proper 28, Year A

This year has not been easy. This is not news to any of us. As a preacher, it has been especially challenging this fall because Matthew, for the most part, is not giving us gentle Jesus. Instead we've heard one challenging parable after another. Today's gospel is particularly difficult because of what it says about judgement and about money and how we use it. What are we to do with a parable that applauds financial success and judges failure? What are we to do with a parable featuring a harsh master and a harsher sentence? I know that there is Good News here, but I struggle to find it.

As a friend reminded me this week, the parables are descriptive, not prescriptive. That is, parables explain something about the kingdom of heaven, and something about who God is, but they aren't supposed to be a roadmap. All too often I hear a parable and look for the one, correct, moral of the story. So what I am supposed to *do*? That's where I get into trouble with this parable. Is Jesus telling me to play the stock market? Is Jesus telling me that if I don't produce, I'm unworthy of the kingdom? If instead we treat this hard story as describing something important about who God is and what the Kingdom is like, maybe we can find hope.

Today's gospel is the second in a three-parable series, in the final week of Jesus' life. Each of the parables is about the end times, the day of the Lord. By definition they are about judgement. The idea that one day God will judge the people of the earth is a very, very old idea. We hear it in the words of the Old Testament prophets and in the psalms. It's an idea that doesn't sit too well with many of us in the twenty-first century. We'd rather focus on God's unconditional love, on grace, and on reconciliation. But if we are to take seriously the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we must also take seriously his teachings, and my goodness Jesus spent some time talking about judgement.

Now, judging is not the same as condemning. Judgement— a reckoning— carries with it both condemnation of wrong acts but also a setting to right of Creation, a setting to right of our lives. I long for the time when, as Julian of Norwich says, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." Judgement is a weighing out, as we see in today's parable. A man gave three slaves money and went away for a long time. Upon his return, two had used the money and made more; one had hidden the money out of fear and could only return what he had received. The first two are judged to be good and trustworthy, and are invited into the joy of their master. That's judgement, right there. The third one, however, is judged harshly. The master calls him wicked and lazy, and he is thrown out.

If the parable is telling us what to do, the message is dire: get out there and produce well, or you're in trouble. God will be mad at you if you don't perform. It doesn't seem to fit with my firm belief in a God of mercy. How can we see this story through that other lens? What truth might it offer about the kingdom of God? Perhaps this: how you live now *matters*. Our actions matter, not because they are a ticket into heaven or hell, but because our actions are a response to God's generosity. Everything we have, everything we are is from God, and so everything we do matters to God. If we, like the third servant, are tempted to let fear guide our actions, the parable shows us another way. It describes a reality where whatever we have been given will bear abundant fruit if only we try.

And what happens to the question of money when we look at this parable through a descriptive lens? What truth is being described? Jesus tells many parables about the kingdom of God, and they are all metaphorical. The kingdom of God is *like* a woman who lost a coin, but it's not really about the coin. The kingdom of God is *like* a mustard seed, which starts so small but grows into a strong plant that gives shelter to birds, but it's not really about the mustard seed. In the same way, this parable uses money to get at a truth about the kingdom, but whatever it's about, it's not really about money.

First of all, the amount of money is absurd. A talent is more than an ordinary person could save in a lifetime, but the master calls even five talents "a little" upon his return. More importantly, if this parable were about money, it would not be good news to the poor: "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." How does that jive with "Blessed are the poor," and "what you have done for the least of these you have done for me?"

So if it's not about money, what is it about? Quite literally, Jesus knows. We can only wonder, we can only meditate and imagine. For me, the answer is love. What loses value when buried, but grows when it is shared and traded? Love. To those who have love, they receive even more, in abundance. Such is the nature of love. To those who hide away their love, hoarding it as if it could be stolen or go bad, that love will go away. Because love doesn't exist in a vacuum. Love doesn't exist outside of relationship, outside of community and connection. Love grows when we share it.

God is love. Love made us, love redeemed us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and love continues to sustain us and create new life out of death, new hope out of grief, new light in the darkness. God made us by, in, and for love, and what a wondrous gift that is. But love is not *only* a gift. It's also an obligation, an obligation to be bearers of God's love, an obligation to love God and neighbor, and *everyone* is our neighbor. We have an obligation to share the love we have received. Use what you've

been given. Don't hoard it away. Don't let fear keep you from loving your neighbor, especially the neighbor who doesn't look like you, or talk like you, or vote like you. God's dream is for each and every one of us to enter into the joy of the kingdom of heaven. Let it be so. Beloved, let us love one another. AMEN.