Providence Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 25:14-30

Our gospel passage takes me back to my years growing up, the afternoons and Saturdays of those years being spent working around the family business, my dad’s cabinet shop. If there was anything in surplus with our family, it was work. So whether sanding cabinets or planing lumber, stacking lumber, cutting firewood, butchering animals, or building a house, there was always something to be done. In fact, if there was anything that we boys learned growing up, it was how to work hard, and if there is any badge of honor in the Pettit lineage, it is precisely that.

Learning to work is not easy, let alone teaching somebody how to buckle down, stick to it, and get the job done. But we learned early on as kids that you do not want to be goofing around if my dad was about, and you would never complain of being bored because he would put you to work. And if he set you on a job, you would not want to be caught sitting, standing around, talking, or joking when my dad came randomly through. Because he, not unlike the master in our parable, would set us up with the task and then would go off and come back at some unspecified time to check on our progress. So we learned that you always want to be actively working lest Dad should come through, and you get scowled at (a scowl that I apparently inherited according to my family), or worse, you get accused of the cardinal sin of “lollygagging.”

But then, after a while, we learned something more. That it wasn’t enough to just be working or feigning work at the moment dad would come by, but… he seemed to know how much should have been accomplished in the time he was gone, and could evaluate our progress and somehow know if we had been slacking off in the time that he was away.

My dad instilled a certain seriousness about life; a gravity to things. Life was not a bowl of peaches but was navigated through hard work, faith, perseverance, and the right choices. And yet, compared to the master in our parable, my dad might come off as relatively buoyant and carefree.

As much as this parable might be considered expected reading, that church-goers would be familiar with it, in my years of discussing this parable with groups, it is hard to find someone who actually likes this story. There are many unappealing aspects. The master is domineering and exacting. He takes from those who have little to give to those who have much. He casts the servant into the realm of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Luke’s version is even worse, presenting the master as a power-hungry and vindictive noble whom no one wants to rule over them.

However, we must remember that this story is not given as a direct representation of God’s nature, the kingdom of God, or the ways of Christ. Rather, a parable is like a little world we are invited to enter for a moment and to gain a new perspective from being in it. We then emerge with a new perspective that affects how we see our reality.

Furthermore, if we read around in Matthew 24 and 25, we can see that we have a string of passages about end times, about coming judgments, and such things right before Jesus’ trial and crucifixion. For the early church, for whom these were first penned, there was this palpable expectation that Jesus was coming again. He was coming again at some unknown time, but the time was near. So as the tone intensifies in the narrative as it gets closer to Jesus’ death in the story, these themes of Jesus’ death and his coming again intermingle. And we are left with an emphasis on what Jesus’ disciples ought to be about until Jesus returns and his kingdom is fulfilled.

Well, since Jesus has tarried about two thousand years, we may have lost that sense of urgency that the master could return at any moment. But the sense is very clear in this parable and the surrounding parables, that the master has gone away and entrusted his servants to carry on his work until he returns. So, it begs the question of what is it that we are to be about in the time that Christ is away with the time and with the resources entrusted to us?

The problem is that as we seek to enter this parable, in addition to the offputting aspects, it is full of gaps. We don’t have enough information, and so as the listener or the reader, we have to fill in those gaps from our own back story. Gaps such as, why did these three servants get different amounts? Had they already proven who was responsible and who was not, is that why the 3rd guy only got one talent instead of 2 or 5? We don’t know. What is it that the first and second servants did with their money, anyway? Maybe they just extorted it from others to have something for the master; we are not told. Are these first two servants to be judged responsible and righteous just because they make money?

The effect of these information gaps is that we don’t have enough to draw too many conclusions. But one thing becomes implicit in the story; it is implicit until, with the third servant’s accounting, it becomes explicit. The parable’s implicit message is that these servants are guided by their understanding of the master’s character and expectations.

Because… we do not know what the servant who received 5 talents did with his 5 talents to get 5 more, nor do we know what it is that the servant who received 2 talents did with his 2 talents.

But it becomes clear that what they did with it is directly related to what the master would have done with it, or at least what is in the range of what the master would be happy with.

So when the master returns and calls them to account, he is pleased. Yes, yes, that’s great; what you have done is in line with my hopes and expectations, so therefore, you can anticipate that I will trust with more things – because I can trust that you know me.

The same happens with the 2nd servant. The master seems just as happy.

But when it comes to the third servant’s turn to answer to the master, what has been implicit becomes explicit. I buried it, because I know that you… He, too, acts out of his understanding of the master. And yet there is a break, a discontinuity, a little complexity because for the first two their understanding of who the master is led them to act in a particular way. Here the servant’s experience or fear of the master leads him to a different response. He is afraid. He has been given little, and he does not want to be the one to waste it, and he is intimated by the master, and he does not want to be the one who comes back with nothing. Maybe he is like those among us who want more structure. Tell me the expectations and the guidelines; give me some best practices, a number for the helpline perhaps. This is too open-ended. He takes his one talent in his quaking hands, and he goes and buries it.

The master reacts not primarily to the amount but to the way of responding. And to this third servant, nothing more will be entrusted.

As we emerge from this parable and its perspective, we are left with a couple echoing questions.

What will we do with what has been entrusted to us while the master is away? When I say “what has been entrusted to us,” this includes an experience of God’s grace. It includes our strengths, our potential, our gifts, our possessions, and our particular places of compassion and love that have sprung up from our unique journeys. And whatever the complex of reasons as to why one has 5 talents, and another 2 and another 1, all we know is that we have been entrusted. And the question comes, what will we do with what has been entrusted to us?

And this all brings us to the other important question. The question whose answer will guide and influence what we do with what has been entrusted to us. Who do we understand the master to be? Because we have been given no set plan or expectations, no clear steps that we are expected to follow, just that we act in alignment with who the master is.

So who is the master to you? What is God like, and how do we act in accordance with it?

Is God an exacting master, like the master in the parable, and so we are tempted to bury what we have lest we be the ones to return with nothing? Is God like those on the TV show Shark Tank, who expects growth and profit margins? Or maybe for you, God is aloof and altogether disinterested in what we do on a day-to-day basis.

Or is God very much like the Christ who spends himself on his beloved, who cares for the least, who dignifies the down-trodden, who offers an intimacy and a personal connection to the Father. The Christ who in the end lays down it all for the sake of the lost. Because if that is our understanding of God, then our response with the things entrusted to us will be quite different. Because if Christ spends himself in ministry for others, do we really want to show up with our pockets full?

Or do we understand God to be a creative God or a God who delights, who makes the mountains in their beauty, who creates nature in all its array? Is our God the God of the God speeches in Job, who creates the sea monsters to play in the great sea; the God who does not necessarily create for efficiency but delights in all his wondrous and varied works? Is God an artist? If you are like me, and grew up inheriting an utter seriousness about life, then perhaps it is good to be reminded of the God who laughs and weeps and delights and creates.

We could go on for some time, thinking about the various ways we may have come to conceive of God, and how this might influence our response. And at this point, you may notice that I am, like a lousy preacher, opening up the range of possibilities rather than narrowing it down to the right one. Because I think it is important work to consider the perceptions of God that have influenced us and what attributes we *want* to direct our choices and impulses.

There was a moment in my late high school and early college years when I was trying to discern what to do with my life and what God was calling me to. And having inherited my dad’s utter seriousness about life, and being reared in a tradition that emphasizes the seriousness of saving people from hell, and such things, I remember being quite distressed by the pressure of figuring it out and getting it right. I went to my friend Larry Lahr who I was sure would sympathize with my dilemma. But to my surprise, his response was this. “I don’t think God cares what we do,”…and he paused as I looked at him bewildered. He continued… “I don’t think God cares what we do, as long as we are completely his.”

As long as we are completely his. Larry’s advice put the emphasis not on the particular choices we should make or the fear of getting it wrong, but on the relationship. Because what Larry thought was that if we focus on the relationship and knowing the God who invites us into the relationship, well, then the rest will take care of itself. We will know what to do, or God will be able to direct us as needed, and we will glorify God in whatever it is we choose to do.

I thought of Larry’s comments as I thought about stewardship. Stewardship is a season in the church that is often expected. And yet it often produces negative feelings or anxiety that the pastor will talk too much about money, or on the other hand, not enough about money so we won’t raise the budget; that the pastor might make us feel guilty, and so on. I think some version of Larry’s advice applies here. There is a range of faithful responses; some have 5 and some 2, and some 1. And I don’t think God cares, nor is it my business, what particular choices we make, as long as we are entirely his, as long as we grow in our relationship and knowledge of what our master is like. The key is that we are growing in our understanding of God and emulating that God in all that we do, with all that God has entrusted to us.

As the poet writes: “because i know / my ways / are not your ways / but in your ways / i’d like to grow.

I think that if we can do that, then the rest will take care of itself.

**Matthew 25: 14-30**

*The Parable of the Talents*

*(Lk 19:11–27)*

14“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29For 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. 30As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’