

Sermon: Year A, Proper 28  
Texts: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18  
I Thessalonians 5:1-11  
Matthew 25:14-30

This morning I'd like to offer you two interpretations of the parable that was just read: the first, a very common misreading; the second, something much closer to its true sense.

Let's start with the bad, which is probably all too familiar to you. According to Jesus, God says: "Work hard!" You've been left in charge, so don't screw up or goof around. Life is responsibility. Remember, there will come a time when you will be judged according to the measure of your success. You will get what you deserve – as will everyone else. So, don't worry about others. To each his own. Charity begins at home, and it gets polluted if it's extended much beyond that. People begin to get lazy, and soon enough they will turn from trying to be productive and will become wasteful instead, dragging everyone down. They will expect a handout, and then a welfare check, and then, eventually, a full-fledged government bailout.

The Bible, however, is clear. It is those who achieve who are applauded. The servants who doubled their shares are welcomed into the joys of heaven. They are both praised for their labor and their gain. The other servant, slothful, and therefore wicked, has nothing to show for the time spent, not even the minimal interest earned by investment. For him there is no pity. He is cast into the outer darkness.

The moral is obvious. Be shrewd. Be aggressive. Seek your own reward. If you do, God will reward you all the more. "For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have in abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." And so it often seems to be. The moral cited is the moral employed in our own time, within our own economic systems, somewhat ruthlessly. Work hard. That's up to you. If possible, work harder still. For nothing succeeds like success. And while it may seem that the competition is fierce and its costs are high, in the end, rest assured, the greater good will be served. Those who deserve to win, will do so, and the others, left behind – social detritus – well, they had their chance. The only blame is theirs. Jesus' parable shows that God himself approves this economic reality.

This way of reading is terribly seductive. There's no satisfaction that can quite match the conviction that our ways are God's ways. But I cannot help but remember that the motto written in steel above the gates of Auschwitz makes the same statement. "Arbeit macht Frei." Work sets us free. Yet to what end? At what cost? The factories of Hitler's Third Reich were famously efficient and highly productive. It would be hard to claim, however, that all their labor, in the end, promoted the common good. And it would be grossly callous to even try to suggest that any progress made justified the devastation of the war and the loss of tens of millions of lives. We must be wary. The parable wasn't told to lend God's support to the arrangements we ourselves make. This is to misread. For the parable was explicitly told in reference only to the kingdom of heaven, and in this sense, it's a story that tells us of God's economy, not ours. So, let's read this story differently.

The very first claim made in the Bible about human beings, the root truth of our nature, is made in the first chapter of Genesis. Before anything else is said, we are told that we have been made in the image of God. And in this same context, all we really know about God is that God is the one who creates. From out of nothing, God calls forth something. From out of chaos, God

establishes distinction and order. Where, before, there was only a morass of confusion, God opens a world of beauty and goodness and truth. And in turn, each development is finished by God's joyful affirmation, "This is wonderful." – the most ecstatic of which was left for us alone, "We are, God said, marvelous." For in us, God planted the capacity to continue creation from within. Our chief vocation as human beings is to further what God initiated and sustains. We alone, of all creatures, are able to follow suit. We alone are able to discern what is true, we alone can choose to do what is good, and only we are able to consciously recognize and fashion what is beautiful. Joy comes from our participation in these forms of creation.

The original sin, which we still suffer, was the interjection of fear into our lives, which disrupts all our trust and gladness. As soon as the forbidden fruit was eaten, division set in. Adam and Eve covered themselves. They hid from God. All their comfort was changed into anxiety. Creating was abandoned for a sudden new interest in self-preservation. Goodness was replaced by cunning. The sight of beauty provoked jealousy. And within a generation, with Cain and Abel, that jealousy turned to murder, which is the perfect negation of creation.

Read in the light of the testimony from Genesis, the meaning of the parable of the talents is completely altered. The first two servants are lauded not for their work, per se, but for their choosing to live into the image that God gave us. Gifted by God the creator, they, in turn, furthered these gifts as co-creators. And when the landlord returned, what they had produced they offered back in the same manner in which the talents were received: freely. It is this exchange without measure and without price that elicits God's joy. The servants recovered for themselves something of what God intended in Eden. They stepped away from the fear and insecurity that stifles life, and thus they brought the kingdom to bear in their own time. For this reason, the kingdom is then given them fully, in embrace and gladness.

In contrast, the third servant has succumbed to the incapacity of endless worry. God's miraculous creativity intimidates and terrifies him, and thus, he buries all that he was given in the dirt, in effect, by his own choosing, making nothing of something – which is the deepest denial of his own nature. And, in this sense, the sentence imposed on him is his own. As he in fear hid away all that he freely received, so he loses his life too. It is concealed in the darkness of his haunted anxiety. Fearing he is alone, he is abandoned to his own exile.

Read in this way, the parable's concluding statement becomes all the clearer. "For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have in abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away." This verse brims with hope. What God extends to us is the opportunity, still, to realize in our own lives the original promise of the world's beauty continually multiplied. What we further, adding joy to creation, God will all the more confirm and expand – even in the presence of sin. This is our option, always open, a grace that is never shut away. We may experience life as our participation in the glory of creation, received and increased and confirmed and ever deepened. Yet we face this vulnerability, too, that we can fall to chronic sinfulness, in myriad ways devaluing God's giving and allowing our happiness, bestowed, to slip into resignation and despair. That choice and that judgment is ours: freedom and affirmation or the bind of constant negation. God holds out the ready promise of the preservation and redemption of all creating, where everything is advanced. This is God's economy.

We have learned through the course of our own lifetime to narrow this abundance down into the strict terms of business and profitability. The measure of our well-being is most often taken by

the size of our financial bottom line, and in difficult economic times the level of our anxiety can be especially tied to the rise or fall of portfolio figures. We need to be reminded that abundance is far larger than this.

The theologian, David Ford, once noted that even the smallest acts of goodness will still surprise us, even when they are expected, even when they are announced ahead of time. Still, in inexplicable ways, they break the usual exchanges of our interactions. Goodness is always superlative, always a bit excessive, always at least a touch beyond warrant. And this is all the more true of beauty. It's excessive, an experience that no collection or list of facts can explain. Beauty is always a gift, and never a product. Our opportunity, in faith, is to reclaim this larger truth, choosing to be conscious creators of goodness and beauty even as work turns more and more toward slavery. The true measure of our lives at any time always begins with one expansive word: marvelous. God looks at us and his response remains the same, we are people worthy of marvel, for who we are and for what, in creating, we can do – with every little something surprising those around us. This is part of being faithful.

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