

Nov. 15, 2020

Gospel reading: Matthew 25:14–30 (Parable of the Talents)

Let's put today's gospel reading in context by reading the verse the comes before it:

13 "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour."

We are again talking about end times... the Advent of the Kingdom of Heaven... and specifically Judgement Day. And the message is "Be Prepared."

How shall we BE prepared?

I think we hear this as an active command... "Get your act together. Or, Get YOURSELF ready" rather than hear it as a passive action being done TO us... We HAVE BEEN equipped with what we need in order to respond. And to illustrate that idea, Jesus tells us the story of three of his servants...

Now we pick up at verse 14...

14 "A man prepares to go a long journey... As he is getting ready to leave he calls in three of his servants... and entrusts them with the management of his estate.-Each according to his ability.

Now, as I read the text those words jump out at me. They sound like Karl Marx: "FROM each, according to his ability. TO each accord to his need." In fact we will find that second part of Marxist socialism in the book of ACTS... where believers "were together in community and had all things in common" and they sold their possessions and distributed the proceeds within the community "to each according to their need."

The early Christian community was somewhat socialist. Since they were believing that the second coming was going to be in their lifetime, they freely gave up what they owned and shared all things in common. And when people are able to be altruistic... that is, selfless and loving. Socialism seems to work. Problem is we are still sinners.

It isn't long before we get the Ananiases and Sapphiras, those who cheat the system for their own profits. You might recall that when their greed is uncovered, they end up dead on the floor, and fear grips the community.

"FROM each, according to his ability. TO each accord to his need."... sounds noble, if the human condition were indeed noble... it would not quickly become the economy of Robin Hood... "Let us, rob from the rich and give to the poor." Historically, Socialism ends up with people dead on the floor and fear gripping the community.

But the text appointed for the day does NOT say...FROM each according to his ability...

It says... TO each according to his ability. In this case, it's a crucial preposition, but YES... it is important.

“TO the man who had been given the five talents... He went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more.”

Take note: First, the owner puts into the care and protection of his servant a large quantity of wealth. And since the word “Talent” here does NOT refer to 5 coins, but a measure of weight... that is quite literally he was given a “TON” of money. Second, the Servant is empowered to FREELY manage the wealth as if it were his very own resources. This is closer to private enterprise... with the idea of producing profits... Although in this case, the profit ultimately belongs to the owner. And as any good Marxist would point out, the servant in this case; is also in the possession of the owner. This appears to be a capitalist system. For a single individual is the owner and sole possessor of all the wealth, and the means of production, including the worker.

Third, the word here for “Traded with” is unusual. It's *ergazomai*... It's a reflexive verb in this case, meaning he put the stuff TO WORK. But it can also mean he put the stuff to SEEK out or search for more stuff. Remember, one of Boshoven's rules is that when Jesus talks about money, it's NEVER about money. It's almost always a stand in for FAITH. So, here we see the servant putting FAITH to work, SEEKING to grow, and produce MORE... More what? We will get to that shortly.

“17And so also, he who had the two talents, likewise produced two talents more. 18But he who had received the one talent went and buried his master's money in the ground.”

Now, why would he do that? Maybe he thought he was overlooked in the distribution. “You gave him five, and him two...” And like Charlie Brown, “All I got is a rock”

When we spend our time comparing ourselves with others, I think sadness is often the result... maybe even resentment. Maybe he felt cheated or humiliated in front of the others. “This is what you think of me? I can only handle ONE!?!” That one would be ironic, since when he is called to account, and he unloads his opinion about the character of the Master... “You are a hard man...” he says, and the Master replies “Oh, you think I'm a hard man do you... Fine. Hard is what you are going to get.” That they both think themselves ‘mischaracterized’ would be ironic... BUT we are not actually told what motivates the servant to bury the talent... so we are left to ponder.

Maybe he thought he was being undervalued? “I'm worth MORE than a single talent...” But remember... a talent is not a single coin. A talent is the weight of 3000 shekels... copper, silver, gold, we are not told which. The weight varies, but it would average out to about 100 pounds. That's a treasure chest that you would struggle to lift by yourself. So, it's serious COIN. Yes, one guy gets five of those and another two... but you have in no way been cheated in the distribution...

“WELL... It’s not mine to keep anyway,” he may think. “You are only going to profit from MY WORK... So might as well bury it.”

Imagining ourselves cheated in the distribution. This is where comparing ourselves to others is unhelpful. When we compare ourselves, our endowments... our attributes... to others... (“Why can’t I have a body like that, or hair like that or a family like that, husband, wife, children... house, home, jobs, opportunities... wealth...?) we become resentful of what we don’t have... rather than be grateful for what we DO have. And if we are going to place blame then It’s God’s fault... He doesn’t love me as much as he loves them.

Instead of hiding the bundle in a closet or something, the man buries the treasure in the ground. There are at least two possible reasons for this:

1. To get it out of his sight because it’s a reminder of his low status before his master (God)
2. It shows contempt for it and how little he values it. You bury dead things. And other disposables. “I buried your gift. I put it in the grave. Here... have back your dead thing.”

REMEMBER: The coin is FAITH. so that action is not going to play well.

GOD: “I gave you a living thing... and you return to me a dead thing?” That’s one way to kindle God’s wrath.

There is one possibility I don’t want to overlook. And that is the possibility that the servant never considered taking a second look at what God was doing. Trying to put the best construction on the situation...

Martin Luther once said that “Sometimes, God blesses a man with wealth, because he does not have the skills to handle anything more important.”

We tend to look at wealth as the best of all possible blessings. Luther reminds us that’s not always so. Lots of things, maybe even MOST things, are more important than wealth. The man who received five talents was NOT LOVED MORE than the man who received two... or the man who received ONE.

But here is a thought... “I gave you ONE, because I thought YOU might be able to do MORE with ONE than the man I gave five.” Or, “I gave you ONE because I thought you were the clever one. I gave you one, because it’s not as easy. I gave you ONE because where I am putting you, one is more than enough...” Think about that.

19Now after a long time the master of those servants came and there was a day of reckoning. 20And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more along with him, saying, ‘Master, you put into my care, five talents; here I have made five talents more.’

I wanted to pick up that thread because the word being used here for “gain” brings with it growth and fellowship. I bring with me five more... Five more WHAT? Remember, what do the Talents represent? FAITH... and what does FAITH produce? More faith? Or in this case... possibly MORE believers. Those talents went “a-seeking” and found and brought with them others... So did the second...

But the third man buried his possession...And so his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! --- Laziness and SLOTH are called out loudly. This servant couldn’t be bothered to serve...At the bare minimum, you should have returned to me a living faith... Had you bothered to simply invest the money I gave you, I should have received my own with interest. I don’t think it’s too big a stretch to say that had he only invested this faith in himself... with the church, at the very least I could have received the growth in YOU and received YOU back. You are my very own...

I think I can make this move, based on the interesting use of language Jesus uses here... To put on deposit with the bankers...

The core of that we could translate as “With the AT THE TABLE GUYS.” Bankers are those that sit at the table, with scales... money counters. The idea of leaving the talent on account with the "at the table guys" I have to smile and ask... Are we not right here in this building today in Table Fellowship (communion)? Is Jesus implying that at the bare minimum you should have left your offering at church... at the table... where your faith could be nurtured so as to return it to me ALIVE? That I might have “received MY OWN with interest”. And at the bare minimum return it to me alive?

Then the warning: WOE...to those who will not listen...

29For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

This story is of the work of the kingdom. It is intended to GROW and increase. This work is the work of every servant, not just the work of the clergy. It comes with a warning to those who bury their faith. And the reminder that there will indeed be a day of accounting.

And we will stand before God in the Judgment.

The good news is we have been blessed with an abundance of faith... SERIOUS COIN. We have it. Use it wisely... maybe even use it foolishly... but set it free to seek and work in the kingdom.