

Lectionary 33A 2017, November 19, 2017, Matthew 25:14-30, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Use your talents wisely. God rewards ingenuity and initiative. Don't hide your abilities away, but put them into service for God and the kingdom. God will judge those who fail to use positively what God has given them.

That's the conclusion most of us draw when we hear this parable of Jesus just read. Jesus is going away. Maybe for a long time. And while he's gone his disciples are to use the resources entrusted to them for building up and expanding the kingdom of God. When he comes back Jesus will reward initiative. But if he finds that you've been lazy, and taken what was given to you and hidden it away, then you can expect severe and harsh punishment. Like I said, this is standard interpretation for the parable. I could probably sit down right now, you've heard it many times before.

I'm not going to argue against this interpretation. I've used it myself when preaching on the text. It comes at a convenient time of year when churches are engaged in their fall stewardship campaigns and encouraging their members to consider how richly God has blessed them and, in a not so subtle way sometimes, to also consider what God expects of them in how they use what they have. With that whiff of fire and brimstone in the background as just a little added motivation. So use your talents, in this case money, and help God's church keep their lights on, buildings heated and pastors fed. Like I said, standard stuff.

But it's not time for me to sit down, at least not yet. Because something troubles me about this parable. As I read it again and again some inconvenient questions arise. If the "man, going on a journey" is the departed and absent Jesus why is he described by the third slave as "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed?" And why is the slave afraid? Why should anyone be afraid of Jesus? And why is he a slave owner in the first place? Where is the justice and fairness in taking away the measly single talent and giving to the guy who's already got ten talents of his own? Lots of questions. Questions that don't lend themselves to the standard answers most of us think this parable provides.

Like with most of the parables Jesus tells we've got to do a little digging into the background. We can't assume the way Jesus' world works and the way ours works are always exactly the same. There are similarities and points of convergence, but there are differences, sometimes significant. One significant difference lies in the way economies work. We assume today that economic activity, the buying and selling of goods, the manufacture and distribution of commodities helps the whole economy and that eventually everyone benefits. A "rising tide floats all boats," we might say. For the day in which Jesus lived that wasn't true. It wasn't an unlimited, expanding and growing economy. The only way someone got rich was by making someone else poorer. You put someone else out of business. You bribed the governmental official. You cheated your way to the top. The harsh slave owner praised his slaves who doubled his money. How did they do it? Did they invent some new product that gave lots of people new jobs, paying them a decent wage with good health care, who then paid their taxes to build that new road from Jerusalem to Jericho? Probably not. The economy was limited. Resources were limited. The slave got richer, but someone got poorer as well.

So what about this third slave? The one who buried the talent. Why was he afraid? Was he afraid of losing the talent? Or did he know that by increasing the talent he was going to need to make someone else poorer? Was he refusing to engage in an economy that was fundamentally unfair and unjust? Where the rich do indeed only get richer and the poor can only get poorer.

That's what the harsh master seems to assume by saying, "for to all those who have, more will be given...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." That sounds more like a picture of reality than it does some kind of proverb or piece of wisdom.

If what I've described bears any resemblance to reality, then what about the fate of the third slave? The one who is thrown out into the outer darkness. Could it possibly be that this slave is Christ? After all, Jesus was cast out of the city, into the darkness that was the cross. Around that cross many wept and possibly there was gnashing of teeth as well. Is the Christ-figure in this parable the slave who refuses to enter into an economic arrangement where someone always loses? Who simply returns one for one what the harsh master gives and doesn't count it a joy to enter into what this kind of master has to offer?

If any of this is the case then what about us today? And does this negate the ways we've read this parable before, as an encouragement to maximize what God gives us as well as a warning against laziness? I'm not sure I want to go that far, at least not yet. But I do believe thinking about this parable in some different ways is in keeping with the way Jesus tells these stories. They aren't always cut and dried and the interpretations don't simply flow from them easily. We can hear the parable as encouragement to make use of what God gives us, while at the same time hearing that we need to pay attention to the one who is thrown out. Because maybe, just maybe, he's thrown out because we are too cavalier with expanding the kingdom at the expense of those who struggle in an economy that doesn't float all boats, at least in equitable ways. And maybe some rising tides actually cause a flood that swamps the little boats that some people find themselves in.

As with any parable Jesus tells we can ask the questions, "Where do we see God?" and, "Where do you see yourself?" Is God the man who has gone on a long journey, seemingly absent, and put us in charge with expanding what he has entrusted to us? Are you one of the slaves, wondering if you've been given a lot, like the slave who got five talents, or are you the third slave who has just received a little and you're afraid of the master's wrath? Or is God the third slave, on the side of those who are poorer than the rest, who are always threatened with losing what little they have? Is Jesus telling this parable because he is soon to be crucified, killed and risen to heaven, and his second coming is going to be delayed? Maybe. But we must always look to the very last words of Jesus in Matthew's gospel in which he says, "Remember, I am with you always to the end of the age." Jesus hasn't really gone away. He is always here, with us. Meeting us in Word and Sacrament. Reminding us that his cross is this world's outer darkness. The third slave refused to follow the usual path of exploiting others in order to get ahead. That refusal got him thrown into a place where others were weeping and gnashing their teeth, probably for the same reason. Jesus always has a knack for ending up with those kinds of people; the exploited, the poor, those the rich and powerful regard as expendable and unwanted. That's where you'll find Jesus.

At the very least we need to hear the parable through the one who promises to be with those he blesses; the poor, those who weep, those who mourn, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. He never leaves them. He never leaves us. He is here, with us, always. Amen.