

THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS

Matthew 25:14-30

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on November 15, 2020, the Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then 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.’ His 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.’

And 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.’ His 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.’

Then 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But 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? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Historians will someday name 2020 with reference to the Coronavirus that has defined our everyday lives. This “year of our Lord” will likely be known as the Year of the Virus, the Year of COVID-19, or the Year of the Pandemic. But I have *some* hope that rather than naming it after the external force that has and taken the lives of over a million people, 2020 will perhaps be named for that human activity it has called upon all of us to do: Wait. I hope historians name 2020 “The Year of Waiting.”

We have all assumed a posture of waiting:

- Waiting for a test
- Waiting for results
- Waiting for a treatment
- Waiting for a vaccine

We have been waiting

- For stimulus check to arrive
- For our children to return to school
- For our office or business to re-open

We have been waiting

- To visit or be visited by our grandparents
- To see our grandchildren
- To know our niece can visit at Thanksgiving
- To schedule a proper service for one who has left us during this time of quarantine, alone but for the fictive kin of nurses and doctors standing by the bed because family couldn't be present.

I moved to Alexandria in 2004 shortly before the Presidential election. A few days after the election a member of the church called me on his way to the airport to say he was going to miss my installation service but say he was glad I was here. It was an act of welcome I would come to experience many times in this congregation, common, yet never *not* special, never *not* heartwarming. In light of the “hanging chads” of the previous election, he then said: “I’m just glad we don’t have to wait this time.”

In addition to everything else in 2020, we have been waiting for a campaign to end, an election to occur, results to bring clarity.

2020: “The Year of Waiting.”

I.

The more sensitive we become as readers of scripture, the more certain aspects of texts can give us pause.

- In a time when we are becoming more openly aware of the role slavery played in the origins and history of our own nation, and the continuing scars it bears in the bodies and souls of citizens and in the body politic of our nation, to hear Jesus tell parables about masters and slaves is not the most gentle of settings he chooses for what is otherwise his best-loved and most creative form of teaching.
- To hear a parable announce at the outset that its three slaves vary in *ability* and are given a sum of money from the landowner *based on* that variance alone gives us a sense of the tragic that being created in the image of God does not necessarily mean being created with equal ability or equal opportunity, a tension that pulses through our economics and politics as we seek to continue the grand experiment of democracy, as we seek to be humane as a society.
- To hear that same parable label as “wicked,” “lazy,” “worthless” those who have less ability does *not* lift our spirits.
- To be further reminded that “*For to all those who have, more will be given...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away*” leads us to question the justice of these varying fates among the human family and to question whether such imbalance is *inevitable*, and, even if so, *acceptable*.

- Finally, when we hear that the one-talent slave is consigned to “outer darkness, where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” we wonder why the slave’s decision not to risk losing the small amount of money the landowner had left with him warrants a parabolic death penalty.

The truth is: we yearn for something more *edifying* from the book we call Holy Scripture, from the hour we call worship, from the twenty-minutes we call sermon, and from the object of it all whom we call our Lord and Savior. Can the one-talent slave not be given a break? Just for once?

II.

It may help to learn that this parable uses story-telling tropes Jesus may have adopted in crafting the parable or Matthew in editing it for his Gospel.

- For example, a “talent” is an unbelievably large amount of money for a landowner to leave under the care of a slave. It amounts to twenty years’ worth of wages. Thus, at a minimum wage of \$15 an hour, this departing landowner is turning over three million dollars to one slave; 1.2 million dollars to another, and \$600,000 to the last. It is exaggerated and far-fetched.¹
- And wouldn’t you love to be a fly on the oak-paneled wall when the first two slaves come into the banker’s office for separate sessions of financial planning?
- In addition, as in the case with most cartoons, somebody has to win in the end, and somebody has to lose. Cartoons, at least as I remember them, have little or no room for nuance. When the curtain comes down, the actors in opposing roles don’t appear in a row on the stage, smiling, holding hands, bowing to the applause of the admiring audience. Rather, in this play, in this cartoon, in this parable, at least one of characters remains backstage, weeping and gnashing his teeth.

Yet if we set aside some of these more slapstick elements in this parable, two things from *opposite* directions may emerge for us, leading us to consider both, and possibly choose – or at least appreciate – *one* as possible prescriptions of our lives in this year of pandemic, this year of waiting.

III.

First, the one talent slave. While it is clear in this parable that Jesus sets this slave up for his harshest criticism, Jesus is not always so harsh. Follow me along here:

- In a different parable,² Jesus praises the *search for and finding of buried treasure* – which he then compares to the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps the one talent slave has not so much missed the mark in burying in a hole in the ground the talent he has been given by the landowner while he awaits the landowner’s return.
- In another parable,³ Jesus praises a steward who has not only been defrauding his master, but once caught, scrambles to ingratiate himself with his master’s debtors by accepting a few cents on the dollar of each debt, in hopes that once his master relieves him of his duties, one of the debtors will return the favor of his largess by putting him on their payroll. Jesus *praises* this *dishonest steward* for meeting his personal crisis with shrewdness.

¹ In the spoken version of the sermon, I did the math wrong and these numbers understated.

² Matthew 13:44.

³ Luke 16:1-13.

Thus, in one instance Jesus praises *buried treasure*; in another instance, a *slave who seeks to survive*. In our parable, the one talent slave, waiting for the landowner to return, seeks to *survive* by *burying the small treasure* he receives.

I take *some* heart from comparing our parable to these other two. I have noticed pastorally that during this year of waiting some of us have chosen to focus on the *treasure* we have been given – home, family, relationships, even solitude. We have reacted to the pandemic by slowing down, trying not to forge ahead with work, work, work, with achievement and advancement, with profits and prosperity. We have chosen to

hold on to what is good,
return no person evil for evil,
strengthen the fainthearted,
support the weak,
help the suffering,
honor every human being,
love and serve the Lord,
rejoicing in the power of God's Spirit.⁴

We have preserved the talent we have been given, knowing that it is treasure.

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The second ray of hope I draw from this parable is its more traditional interpretation praising five talent slave. He invests the talent he has been given. It doubles in value. He returns it to the landowner, and the landowner gives him more talent, more responsibility, more possibility, more to invest. “Well done, good and trustworthy slave,” the landowner says. “You have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.”

What strikes me about the five talent man is not that he has tremendous success in investing the landowner's money, but rather than is willing to do something we often are hesitant to do: Take a risk.

Now I know in a time of pandemic it is *risky* for a minister to endorse certain types of *risk*: the risk of defying health warnings, the risk of not wearing a mask, the risk of ignoring social distancing. For me to urge you to that kind of risk would amount to homiletical malpractice.

But what I *am* inviting you to consider is a different kind of risk: a risk that dares to *hope*, that dares to *believe*, that dares to *trust* that we will not be in this situation for ever, that we will not be sequestered for the rest of our lives, that we will not be unable to greet and hug and hold friends and family and fellow church members for the rest of our days.

It takes a certain amount of courage in times like these to risk being *positive*, to risk believing that life *can* and *will* go on, to risk continuing to *love* and *hope* and *think* and *pray*, to risk *falling in love*, to risk becoming *engaged*, to risk *bringing a child* into the world, to risk *entering a degree* program, *buying* a home, *starting* a business, *accepting* a new position. It takes a certain amount of risk to *believe* in the future, to *believe* in God's ultimate *watchfulness* over it and even hidden *involvement* in it. It takes courage to risk *believing in God*. I think that courage is why the five talent slave draws the applause of Jesus. Even in a “Year of Coronavirus,” even in a “Year of Waiting,” he is *willing to risk*, *willing to believe*.

⁴ A charge and benediction often used at Westminster found in the PCUSA *Book of Common Worship*.

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A couple of months ago I reached out to someone in our church simply to see how things were going. She shared a poem she had written while carefully sequestered. With her blessing, I share it with you now.

“A Way Forward”

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We have lost time,
But we have this moment.
We have lost jobs,
But we still have our skills.
We have lost houses,
But remember how to create home.
We are in pain,
But pain can signal a need for change.
Our losses are huge,
But loss opens room for the new.
We have lost loved ones,
But we still have love.
We have lost our world,
But we carry the world within us.
And if faith has been lost,
Remember God always is present.

Sitting at home, having food and supplies delivered, putting together jigsaw puzzles, watching entire seasons on HBO, venturing out into the yard only to get the mail or feed the birds or onto the street only to walk a few blocks masked, changing lanes for approaching foot traffic – in such sequestered waiting it takes risk to believe and hope. Yet to whom such courage is given, such risk is taken, more will be given.

Perhaps 2021 will be named “The Year of Believing Again.”

Amen.

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