

November 13, 2011: CELEBRATING WHAT GOD WILL DO
Matthew 25:14-30, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Psalm 123
Eileen Parfrey, Pastor

Springwater Presbyterian Church

Today's parable is not about strategic investment practice, so forget all those sermons and self-help books about God's intention to double your net worth. To begin with, the "successful" slaves and their talents aren't the point of the story, given the juicy stuff that happens between the master and the unsuccessful slave. Did you catch the accusations they sling at each other? One is harsh, unscrupulous and greedy. The other is wicked and lazy. Neither denies the accusations. Unscrupulous, maybe, yet this master knew his slaves well enough to know what each could handle. And boy, did they have money to handle! It would be like your boss saying to you, "Hang onto this \$1.5 million until I get back." That the third slave "only" gets one talent is not miserly; it's 15 years of subsistence wages in one fell swoop, about \$300,000. No directions, no strings, money simply handed over. The trust funds are mind-bogglingly generous, and the slaves have all the freedom to use their initiative in managing it. Colossally naïve or so-rich-a-little-loss-won't-hurt or profligate beyond comprehension or just plain generous, the master then leaves town for a long time.

When Jesus told this parable, absentee landlords were considered evil incarnate. Once the master left town, Jesus' listeners would have mentally filed him in their villain folder. They would naturally side with the third slave, who behaved prudently, adopting the accepted wealth protection practice of the time, namely burying it. This was hyperbole. No slave could legally possess such wealth, nor could he trade with it, and if the master had that much cash to toss around, he was clearly unscrupulous and corrupt. Giving and receiving interest was a violation of religious law. This parable comes as Jesus tells his disciples how to live once he's gone. If Jesus is the absentee landlord, by a 21st-century reading, this is a call to discipleship of flourishing fruitfulness. "Take the risk!" he seems to say. "Love passionately, invest yourself deeply, use your talent!" Where the third slave fails, is in allowing fear to tyrannize him. It's as if Jesus warns us against playing it safe with our talents, risking the loss of priceless growth opportunities. Not to mention, the master's appreciation.

But what if Jesus isn't the absentee landlord? What if this is about a tyrannical, evil master, as Jesus' first-century listeners would have assumed? In this reading, the challenge is to ask whose voices matter in a world of power abuse and greed. If the master is corrupt, who will hold him accountable? He does not dispute the third slave's assessment of him—unscrupulous, stealing the work of others, taking credit for himself. Is this like your God? The tyrannical owner squanders the potential and freedom of his slaves, giving them unimaginable wealth with no strings attached. From the point of view of the first two slaves, it's squandering that pays off. There's something in it for them. From the point of view of the third slave, it's an abuse of power, and the master is the sole beneficiary. He blows the whistle. Jesus' first listeners might have heard this as a parable about living courageously even under oppression, exposing the abuses of power, standing with the oppressed. Doing what they expected the Messiah would do.

Both readings are legitimate—take some risk to grow your God-given talents, or blow the whistle on tyranny. Both have merit, both imply the squandering of something precious.

Perhaps, rather than one or the other, it's a both/and situation with this parable. If we allow the truth of both readings, we might be able to face the tyranny of our own fear. We might be able to see how fear impacts our view of stewardship. Like the slaves in the parable, we pretty much face the God we imagine (Mark Douglas, *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 1*). If our God is a disinterested absentee landlord, returning in unscrupulous greed to demand our talents with interest, we aren't surprised when we're thrown into the outer darkness when we don't pay up.

Maybe this sort of God deserves some whistle-blowing. If our God has absolute freedom to continue to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven through us, the whistle-blowers of the world, we might feel a need to work a little harder, to stare down the tyranny of our own fear. If our God is concerned about our entire selves, is always present on behalf of us, is genuinely affected by what happens in our relationship (as Terry Fretheim asserts), then we have both more freedom and more expectation to use our talents. We need both readings. The tyranny of fear is very powerful. It is precisely from that tyranny that Jesus draws us when he asks for generosity. He offers us abundant life in return.

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