

Talents

Matthew 25:14-30
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If you were to ask, “What is the most *famous* parable Jesus ever told?” I suppose I would answer the *Parable of the Prodigal Son*, wherein a son sets off upon a journey to a far off land, squanders all his inheritance in unrighteous living, comes to himself, returns home, and is received by his father with an open heart and open arms. The parable of the Prodigal Son is told and retold, I think, because it strikes in us a universal chord. We all stray from God to pursue our own fortunes, and we all hope that God will forgive us when we return to him, as inevitably we must, bankrupt.

If you were to ask, “What is the most *incisive* parable Jesus ever told?” I suppose I would answer the *Parable of the Unforgiving Servant*, wherein a king forgives the prodigious debt of his servant, who in turn refuses to forgive the trifling debt of his fellow servant. The parable of the Unforgiving Servant is so biting because it is so undeniably true. We are quick as lightening to partake of God’s grace but as slow as molasses to bestow it.

If you were to ask, “What parable of Jesus *best comforts the afflicted?*” I suppose I would answer the *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, wherein Lazarus lies at the rich man’s gate, wracked with disease, covered with sores – starving, thirsting, dying. But at the end of his suffering he, from Abraham’s embrace, beholds an eternity free of pain. Through Lazarus we ourselves dare hope that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”

If you were to ask, “What parable of Jesus is *the most relevant for us today?*” I suppose I would answer the *Parable of the Rich Fool* to whom life consisted of the abundance of possessions. He pulls down his barns to build larger ones to store all he has accumulated for himself. He reckons to live out his days in pleasure and prosperity. He *doesn't* reckon, however, that that very night he would die and find himself answerable to God. I cannot imagine a more express warning against the individualism, hedonism, materialism, and conspicuous consumption that, even amidst the economic crisis occasioned by them, we continue to take for the marks of success.

And if you were to ask, “What parable of Jesus is the most often *misinterpreted?*” I suppose I would answer that it is this morning's gospel lesson, the *Parable of the Talents*. In it a man, before departing on a journey, entrusts his property to his slaves. To one slave he entrusts five talents, to another, two, to another, one. Upon his return he demands an accounting of what he entrusted to them. The slave who is entrusted five talents doubles them, as does the slave who is entrusted two. But the slave who is entrusted one talent could only return it to his master, for he had buried in the ground. That slave is harshly condemned.

Normally this parable is interpreted as an exhortation to productivity -- God will judge us according to how productive we are with the gifts God has given us. While it's true that we should endeavor to be productive with the gifts God has given us, it is not true that God will judge us according to how productive we are with the gifts he has given us.

Were it true, it would surely cause us to forget, as per the apostle Paul, “it is by grace, through faith that we are saved, not by works.” Were it true, it would surely lead to works righteousness.

And furthermore, as often as not, use of the gifts God has given us, right use of them at any rate, will not *appear* productive at all. The prophets, for example, made right use of the gifts that God had given them, and no one ever even listened to them much less heeded them. Their productivity lay in their *unproductivity* -- for it exposed the sin of the people.

Or to cite a more recent example, use of the gifts God gave Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not appear productive. He began an extremely promising career as a biblical scholar and theologian, but he nipped it in the bud to join the German underground. He eventually entered into a plot to assassinate Adolph Hitler, for which he was executed shortly before the war's end. As both an academician and as a resistance fighter Bonhoeffer left his aims unaccomplished. And yet for his efforts he came to be seen as one man's expiation of the sin of the German people.

No, the central thrust is not an exhortation to productivity. It is an *admonition* against inaction, and that which underlies it -- fear, as in the case of the slave, or weakness, or irresponsibility, or evasion, or denial, or indifference, or indecision, or indolence, or caution, or comfort. God will not judge us according to how productive we are with whatever gifts God has given us. God will judge us, however, for inaction.

Consider the slave who buries his talent. When his master asks him to give an accounting of what he entrusted to him, what does he say? *“Master, I know the kind of person you are. You’re tough! You’re exacting! You seek a return even from those in whom you’ve made no investment. So in fear I hid the talent you entrusted me. I buried it in the ground. So here it is, safe and sound...”*

And consider the master’s response. *“You lazy and wicked slave. So you knew that I’m tough, that I’m exacting, that I seek a return even from those in whom I’ve made no investment? And so you made no effort whatsoever? You didn’t even put the talent in the bank so it could collect interest?!”* The master judges him not for lack of productivity, but for inaction.

And now the reason that this parable is so often misinterpreted can be seen to emerge. It is because *it admonishes inaction; it is because it admonishes a sin of omission.* The sins of intention are obvious. These are the sins of pride. The sins of omission are less obvious. They are the sins of pride’s counterpart. They are the sins of sloth. They are less obvious because they are comprised of a lacking. They are comprised of a deficiency. They are comprised, finally, of nothing. But that nothing is in fact something, at least according to the Bible. Inaction is something.

And because sins of omission are less obvious, they are the most intractable and insidious kinds of sins, precisely because they are less obvious and so unacknowledged – by

anyone, but especially by those who commit them. And not only do they not acknowledge them, they often deem them a virtue and cast a mild and smug judgment against those eccentrics, those rabble rousers, those traffickers in the impolite and unpleasant who *act*. The *Parable of the Talents* is so often misinterpreted because sins of omission are so often misinterpreted.

There is a story coming out of the Holocaust, the story of a rescuer, who for the last two years of the war harbored a Jewish family that he discovered hiding in a forest. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the rescuer. He was, in fact, a pig farmer. But he was obviously a man of great resourcefulness because he dug a cellar for them to hide should the Nazis come search for them – as they did several times – under the place where he slopped his pigs. He knew that the Nazi's dogs could not smell them there.

When interviewed about it, he described an intricate system that he devised to vouchsafe their safety. He at all times hid all evidence of their presence. His children took turns standing watch from a hill over the road that led to the farm. He himself took the night shift. He traveled hundreds of miles to procure any supplies for them that would signal their presence.

When asked of the extraordinary effort he made – of the risk he assumed, of his sacrifice -- like so many other heroes he was self deprecating. He joked that he always wondered why God made him a pig farmer, and now he knew. But when the interviewer pushed him, his eyes filled with tears, and he mumbled, "I couldn't stand by and do nothing. The

world had gone mad. The hatred. The bestiality. I had to prove to myself that humanity was merely under attack but it was not defeated.”

There are those who *can't* stand by and do nothing. These are NOT those for whom Jesus told the Parable of the Talents. He told it for those who CAN stand by and do nothing, who can and who do – so they can't and they don't. Amen.