

IT'S ONLY A STORY... (PART 2)
 OUR FEAR AND THE GOD WE SEE

Merciful God resisting the iron fist which reaps where it did not sow: give us courage to accept your faith in us and compassion to stand with all who are cast aside; through Jesus Christ, who became nothing that we might have everything.

A Collect for Proper 28A, Prayers for An Inclusive Church

THE 24TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
 Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30
 NOVEMBER 19, 2017

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 25:14-30

Jesus said, "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.'"

I begin with insight I shared last week from a recent daily meditation by Fr. Richard Rohr who

writes: "In the end, however, the object and goal of all spirituality is finally the same for all genders [all

people]: union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world.”

The presence of Jesus Christ in the world, in his ancient and present embodiment (in us and in people everywhere), in friendship, teaching, prayer, action are all to this end of drawing us into union with God, the sacred, to express and to engage us in the divine love, to draw our hearts, minds, souls into vibrant life and fullness, and to bring us into participation in the world in service....

Also, we are at the end of the church year. Next Sunday is the Last Sunday after Pentecost and the first Sunday of the new year is December 3rd, the first Sunday of Advent. We can see it in this annual strange blend of Thanksgiving wreaths, Turkey Drive and Christmas Baskets....

While I almost never engage in sermon series, were you to pick up a copy of the manuscript of this sermon, you would find “It’s Only A Story ... Part 2” on this sermon. The second of big, challenging parables for these final three Sundays of the church year is in front of us. Today: the parable of the talents, actually three large fortunes – not talents like playing the piano.

These teaching stories that Jesus frequently used are, in fact, *stories*, so when they accost us by

violating our sensibilities, when we are outraged and appalled, they are doing their job. There’s no one meaning to any parable. There is not a right or wrong interpretation. There are typically many things to see in each one. They are not real – they didn’t actually happen – but are made up scenarios to disrupt and confound we who listen to them. They are not strictly analogies – where each character stands for someone else.

How can this story disrupt us in such a way as to further open our lives to union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world?

What has captured me in reading this parable again is the servant who received the single talent and buried it in the ground – and the encounter with his boss, the master, at the end of the parable.

The disconcerting thing is wrestling with imagining the master in the parable as God. Is Jesus telling us that God is harsh and unyielding and an appropriate focus of fear? *Some* of us might quickly move to seeing themselves as the servants who were given rewards but some (maybe most?) of us might readily think outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth awaits.

What do we make of that?

And if the master with his

severe judgment is not a stand-in for God, why is Jesus telling us this parable in this way?

Clearly the three servants who were entrusted with their master's goods – all fortunes – did different things. Two moved off and multiplied the value of what they were given to care for and returned an abundance to their master. It seems they had learned a thing or two from him and had little hesitation in leaping in to the risky and sometimes rewarding work of the world.

The third servant dug a hole.

The most telling phrase for me in this reading is about two thirds of the way through where the servant says, “I was afraid” in attempting to explain and justify what he did – and did not do – with what the master had entrusted to him.

Equally important is the servant telling the master how he saw and understood the master: “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed...,” he says.

So I was afraid.

I hear another telling moment when the landowner says to the hole digger: “You knew, **did you**, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?”

The rest of the encounter with the hole-digger servant seems to be

based on the servant's view of the master in which the master is saying: “okay, if you are so committed to seeing me in this way, *'knowing' what you know*, then this is what you get.”

What if we get the God we see? Or what if our limited, constrained, partial, perhaps fearful and negative view of God allows us only *that* lens for seeing God? And what impact does that view of God have on everything else we do? Does it make us hole-diggers – sometimes burying something that has been placed in our hands, supposedly to keep it safe – but sometimes burying ourselves in the process?

Apparently the other two servants had no similar paralyzing qualm, they were not cowering with the much greater – and in fact stupendous sums they were given to manage – to steward. Even the single talent – the one buried in the ground – was equal to 20 years of wages of a laborer – so the servant with five talents was given 100 years of wages to care for – and he dove right in.

How do you see God?

And, perhaps more pointedly, how do we as a parish see God?

It makes a difference and determines what we do with our whole lives, how we live, the actions we take, and what we do with what we have. I mean that individually and for us as a faith community.

How we see God is challenged in the story of Jesus.

As we move through these parables, we can know that Jesus is God who appeared as a baby on the margins of his culture, and also, that Jesus is God who was crucified outside the city wall.

So: can we accept a picture of God as vulnerable to human life – as vulnerable to everything that distresses and damages us? Vulnerable to everything that beckons us into relationships that can confuse us, that pull us from our comfort zones as Jesus certainly did in his family and as Jesus found in his relationships with his friends and with all who pressed in on him

in his earthly ministry?

Who is God we are encountering here and now, in this moment? And in this one?

Union, divine love, inner aliveness, soul abundance, and generous service to the neighbor and the world... these things do not need to be made up by us or from generation to generation. These are gifts to acknowledge, embrace in the living, immediate presence of God in whatever ways we can, with those who are with us, in the fullness of God who is always where we are, in us, in all of those around us, in the whole, living, created world that attends our every waking (and sometimes fearful) moments



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