

1 Thess 5:1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30

Second Sunday before Advent

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If you can put yourself in another shoes, now is a good time to do it. If you can imagine yourself a poorer person than you are, a more subjugated person than you are, a less free person than you are. Then do it now.

Imagine yourself for a moment a first century Palestinian land worker. You might be called a servant, but in reality you were a slave. You had nor actual rights, instead you had to work for your master – he would provide you with your food and shelter, but you could own nothing yourself. And your family, any children were also property of the master. All around you you saw that those who had much got more. The rich become richer and the poor, like you, remain at the bottom of the pile.

Even if your master gives you freedom, you will remain at the bottom of the pile because you will still not own anything, and now although you have your freedom you will have to pay rent and buy food ...

So, here you are a lowly slave, working for a man who you have seen behave badly towards his workers. A man who cons and tricks his way into great wealth, taking land that is not his, and not looking backwards at the lives which are ruined as a result.

Now imagine that this master gives you a portion of his wealth. And he tells you he is going away for a while. What are you going to do?

Calling to mind our parable today, the parable of the talents – are you really going to be brave enough to take this precious wealth and risk it on a venture? Maybe you are? Or, maybe, like many who have no power, no choices to make, no status and no hope you would take the treasure and store it somewhere where it will not be damaged or stolen from you and where you cannot be falsely accused of theft.

If we read to the end of the story, we discover that the master returns and asks for his property back. And the poor servant who did no wrong at all, who did not trade, or steal, or accrue wealth that was not his is condemned – he is thrown out of the masters house, outside of his protection and into the darkness to a fate of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

A traditional reading of the parable of the talents has us cast God as the master. Demanding we invest what he has given us (conveniently using the play on the word Talents, which in the NT is money with gifts we may or may not have). For the benefit of Gods kingdom.

But I find this is hard to do on the back of all we have learnt from Jesus about God so far. God is, we are told, like a farmer who loves his sheep, and does not give up on any of them. God is like a father who welcomes back his son, who ran away, spent his inheritance and brought shame on the family with an enormous party. God, in Jesus, urges us to bind the wounds of the stranger, give our possessions to the poor, travel an extra mile and forgive 70 times 7 when someone offends us.

It just doesn't work that God will take the role of a master known to be a tyrant and condemn a man who has done nothing wrong. At the end of the parable the cruel master tells the servant that it would have been better if he had invested his money in a bank, at least then

there would have been interest – another clue that the master is not God – lending money for interest was against the Torah.

So how do we understand this parable? Maybe Jesus was commenting on the way of the world. The unjustness of the world. The reality that those who line themselves up with the ways of the world (so the 1st and 2nd servants who made 'good' investment of their master's money) seem to do alright. More than alright. Those who deal with the world in the way it understands will probably become richer, more admired and gain status. Those who start out with greater 'talents' tend to get more invested in them and then perform better and then get rewarded more.

And Those who start out with less, receive less, risk less, and rarely end up with more. This was true of the world then and it is true now. Jesus may well have been telling a story that reflected the inequality of the world.

I want you to use your imagination again. This time you are not a Palestinian land worker, you are a fearful first century follower of Jesus. The great temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed and you are living in under the tyrannical Romans. And you are trying to work out how you should live your life whilst you wait for Jesus to come back. Matthew was writing to you when he writes this gospel.

In using Jesus parable he wanted you to understand that just as living in fear will not get you anywhere in the world neither will it get you anywhere in bringing in the longed for Kingdom.

If Jesus followers hid themselves away, there was no reward from earthly masters (as the parable showed) and no progression of the Kingdom either. Nothing changed for anyone.

Matthew was writing to help the Christian disciples to work out how to live their lives when the world was their enemy and they were fearful. And his encouragement is to not live our lives as the world expects. And not to live our lives in fear either - being too afraid to take risks for the Kingdom

If we reverse the figure of the boss in this parable and say that this is NOT God – our God is not ruthless or exploitative. We don't HAVE to invest, produce something and hand a profit over to God to get along with Him.

Then we can begin to live life differently. We can stop making every relationship (including the one we have with God) transactional and start making it about Grace. We can begin to build transformational communities in which all are welcomed, all are cared for, all are honoured and all are loved.

And that way of living is how we begin to challenge the inequalities of the world and the injustices of the world. We have to live it out. In every encounter you have and in every church community you build.

The risk of seeing this parable as a call to use our gifts/our talents – whether they are skills or resources - as good stewards of the church is that we focus on making a church that embraces the ways of the world. But we are called to focus on a Kingdom that will not.

We are called to accept and live out and proclaim in all we do a gospel that says no matter what talents you have God loves you and no matter what talents you lack God loves you and no matter how low you find yourself in life God loves you.

And that's it: we have all been given that gift. And our gift back to God is to live life like we believe it!