

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel reading is one of the texts that is often used to preach about stewardship at this time of year, since it clearly has to do with money and how you use it. And that, of course, is an important part of stewardship, though not the only one. The takeaway from this text as far as stewardship is concerned is traditionally this: "Be faithful with what has been entrusted to you by God. After all, it's not yours anyway. Everything you have has been entrusted to you by God. Make sure you recognize that, and respond to God's generosity by being generous in your support of the church." That's not a bad stewardship pitch. In fact, it's a pretty good one. The problem for us today is that I have come to believe that that stewardship message has very little to do with how the parable of the talents should be read.

More about that in a minute. This is stewardship month at Grace, and we have temple talks lined up for all five Sundays of this month. A stewardship letter and pledge card went out to each household in the mail yesterday. Please give that your attention, and please fill out and return the pledge card. As someone pointed out recently behind the scenes here, Grace has a long history of generosity. And a significant proportion of what comes in to the church goes right back out in different ways to help people and agencies here in our local community and beyond. Grace has been and continues to be a source for good, or more accurately, a conduit of God's goodness. But let's not forget that our weekly worship services, whether in person, or now by necessity "virtual" or "live-streamed" are a key part of the conduit for God's goodness. Weekly gathering around word and sacrament, as Claire told us last week, are fundamental not only to the what the church is, but also to how God is at work in the world. God is at work in us in this way to transform and empower us to be agents of love, forgiveness, and hope in world that is sorely in need of them. And in this time of virtual worshiping, I want you to know that we are reaching people outside of the Grace community, and even outside of Champaign-Urbana. We have people regularly attending these services from the Quad Cities, Western Pennsylvania, Atlanta, Tallahassee, and St. Louis, and until a few weeks ago, also from Jackson, Alabama. I think that's remarkable. Thank you for making that possible. Thank you for stewardship of God's gifts to you and for your continuing support into the coming year. It makes a difference!

Here ends the stewardship message. Because as I said a moment ago, as important as stewardship is for churches, I don't think that's what our Gospel text this morning is about at all. But what it is about is even more helpful and appropriate to our times. It has taken me a while to fully appreciate this, so I expect it will be a journey for you as well. My new appreciation for this text depends on the work of a couple of biblical scholars who have analyzed the New Testament from a social science perspective to help us see the Bible as its original audience would have seen it.

The understanding of this parable that I grew up with, and I'm sure you did too, is that this is a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven. The master is Jesus, and the slaves are his followers. Jesus entrusts us with all kinds of gifts. Some of us are more talented than others. Get it? Talented? It's not really a pun, because our word talent comes from this parable. I expect the biblical reference is lost on most people. It was lost on me for a good chunk of my life, even though I've known this parable since childhood. Anyway, some of us are more talented than others, but each of us is expected to use what we've been given to build up the Kingdom.

But what if I told you that pretty much everything we've thought about this text is upside down and backwards? What if I told you that this isn't a parable of the Kingdom, but a negative example that sets up a contrast with what comes next in this chapter, which we'll get in next week's Gospel reading? What would you think if I told you that the good and faithful slave in this story, from the perspective of the story's original audience, was the one who buried the one talent and gave it back to his master just as he had received it? You're skeptical, aren't you? I understand. Been there, done that.

So here's how we get there. Because we are embedded in a capitalist economic system that values the accumulation of wealth, we take it for granted that it was a good thing for the first two slaves to have increased their master's property. But the ancient people for who this was first written saw things very differently. They understood economics as a zero-sum game. For them, there was only so much wealth in the world, and for one person to increase his or her wealth meant someone else having less. There's no such thing as creating wealth in this understanding. A well-known fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, is famous for preaching against excess wealth. He went so far as to say that those who have more than they need have effectively stolen it from the poor, who do not have enough. That kind of talk is anathema in our culture. And even in his time, as you might imagine, it was pretty unpopular with the rich. Also, the practice of earning interest on money that you lend was thought to be immoral for much of history. Martin Luther was very critical of the practice.

Who then is the master in this story, if not Jesus? Well, he's a personification of how the world works. Some become rich at the expense of others. Their focus is on themselves, and they employ others to aid and abet their selfish agendas. And what they call good is actually bad for others. The slaves who use their master's money to make more money are the agents of exploitation and oppression. And what about the third slave? Ancient Jewish writers, who shared this culture, concluded that the most faithful way to handle money entrusted to you by someone else was to bury it in the ground so that only you could find it. If such money was lost, they said, you could not be held responsible, because that was the safest thing that could be done. So not only did the third slave do the most faithful thing with this master's money, he also did not contribute to more exploitation and injustice by gaining wealth at the expense of others.

If all of this is right, then this parable is not telling us anything we don't already know. Injustice reigns, the strong exploit the weak, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. So, why would this story be here in Matthew's Gospel? It's here to set up a contrast between how the world works and how the world will be judged by God. But we need next week's Gospel reading to make sense of it. Next week's Gospel reading is the judging of the nations, in which the Son of Man sorts out people like sheep and goats. The sheep he commends for caring for him – feeding, clothing, and visiting him. The goats he condemns for not caring for him. None of them remember either caring for him or not caring for him. That's when he tells them that when they were caring for others, especially the "least" among them – or when they were *not* caring for others – *that's* when they were caring for him, or not. It turns out that what God cares about and what we care about, what God considers successful and what we consider successful, what God calls faithful and what we call faithful, are very different things.

With all of this in mind, the point of our reading today is that being faithful, refusing to participate in the ways of this world that disproportionately benefit some at the expense of others – that will make you an enemy of the powers that be. It will make you unpopular. It may even cost your position and your livelihood, and get you "cast into the outer darkness" like the third slave. But let me remind you, as I did a couple of weeks ago, where this is all leading. This will

be Jesus' story as Mathew's Gospel builds to its conclusion. By this point in the Gospel, Jesus has already made himself an enemy of the powers that be. He has drawn the anger of the religious authorities by his teaching and healing, he has upset their business as usual in the temple, and they have been looking for a way to get rid of him. Soon he will be the one cast into the outer darkness, crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. But his story doesn't end there, and because of that, because of his resurrection, ascension, and promise to come again, the story of the faithful who follow him will not end in the outer darkness.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, this parable is to encourage us to faithfulness even and especially in difficult times such as ours when truth, justice, and care for others have fallen out of favor. God is calling us to faithfulness, faithfulness that is unpopular, faithfulness that will hurt. But God promises to be with us in the outer darkness in Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit to give us the faith and hope that empower us to love God and our neighbors in bad times and it good. Take heart in that promise, dear ones, and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.