

“What We Do With What God Gives”

Psalm 123:1-4, Matthew 25: 14-30

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November 15, 2020

In bible study last Wednesday, the scripture was read and before I could say my usual, “the word of the Lord” to which everyone replies “thanks be to God” I heard someone share a spontaneous one word response of “ouch.” And I love how that flowed. A person said, “ouch” I said “the word of the Lord” and everyone said “thanks be to God” or at least as well as they can on the garble of Zoom voices speaking at once.

Take the talent from the one who has one and give it to the one who has ten? Ouch, the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. Cast the third worthless slave into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth? Ouch, the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. 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. Ouch, the word of the Lord, thanks be to God. A master calling a slave wicked and lazy for exercising caution that makes sense to me? Ouch, the word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

One of the great gifts of working with children over the years is their reaction to a story like this. After hearing about the birth of Jesus with us, the baptism of the beloved son, the calling of all manner of person as a disciple, miracles of nature leading to hungry people being fed, healing, abundance, things that literally saved people, the kids would hear this story in our exploration of parables and say the same thing each year – no way, there is no way Jesus said that.

But that is not what they meant. What they meant was and we would get there eventually, there is no way that what Jesus said is a simple analogy, Jesus stories are great and complex and important and the words of life, but it doesn’t mean that the Master = God and we equal the slaves, because the kids are sure that the Master as God wouldn’t talk so rudely to someone. The master as God would be able to find a different way than burying talent = gnashing of teeth in outer

darkness. And ultimately, they would come to this issue: there is no love in the story.

There is love, always in Jesus, always in what Jesus does, but not in every story and parable he tells. At least not in a way that is clear to children. Not in a way that is clear to the ones to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. And this is a Kingdom of Heaven parable, coming right on the heels of the passage Pastor Scott preached about last week, the kingdom of heaven is like ten bridesmaids with lamps to meet the bridegroom, then the transition sentence like this, for it is (insert the Kingdom of Heaven) as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves.

Pastor Scott shared our theme of Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God, the words of the song we will sing, as the connector between the scripture from last week, this week, and next. Again, this week as in last in this kingdom parable, there is a leaving and a delay, a return and an accounting, an ending that feels uncomfortably ouch. To which I find myself with kids and with the folks at Bible Study this week, best describing the challenging themes of these parables with a fine use of double negatives, “I wouldn’t say that judgement is not a thing to consider here”

Clear, right? “Although expectations are not clearly outlined for the talents, it isn’t like they didn’t know they had them?” That might be three negatives, and clear again, right?

But what I like about the double negative is that they match the content of a parable – it is not that the master is necessarily God and the slaves necessarily us, because a lot of that doesn’t compute, but it is not *not* about how we, to quote Pastor Scott quoting Walter Brueggemann, grow in disciplines of readiness. Scott identified three last week, discipline of prayer and silence, discipline of attentiveness to the poor, discipline of attentiveness to the enemy. I wonder if we can find a few more for us, a set we might call disciplines as risks: gambles of faith over cautious fear, a willingness to let go of the urge to preserve, seeing ourselves as ones capable of growing, multiplying and transforming.

On Thursday I listened to a webinar offered by the Langley High School PTO on parenting in the pandemic by a local therapist who our family knows pretty well, but haven’t seen personally in some time. She encouraged parents in

the pandemic to do their best, with their mature brains, to offer their children a steady dose of it-will-be-okayness because adolescent brains are not neurologically wired to maintain this steadiness as well as ours are. They have greater adaptability, but fewer coping skills. Their brains have greater flexibility, but less ability to deal with uncertainty of the future, because they haven't had as much uncertainty as we adults have. And as she was speaking, I kept thinking – oh I have known this, but I need to be reminded, need a bit of a wake-up call. I always want to parent this way, but my less regulated self often shows up. I know that what I do is not always what is healthy or needed, that I have better and worse days. So I need reminders and being reminded of the way I want to be is the best way for me to be that way.

Here is how this webinar and this scripture seemed connected to me this week. Reminders gets our attention and focus us on how we want to be in the world. Sometimes we need a jolt to cut through the complacency, the bad patterns, the distraction. This parable is a reminder and a jolt of the following things: that following Jesus is about risk over fear, placing the needs of another about our comfort and security. And as the Psalm tells us, finding the mercy of the Lord that will dissolve any and all contempt we hold for another human being and will forgive contempt that has been turned our way. That whatever we want to preserve and bury, because it has worked, or we don't have the time, or we like it this way, is not what is being asked of us. Because burying means we don't need to think about it again, and we are always being called to think about what helps another, what actions we should be taking as disciples. That what is being asked of us is that we see ourselves, no matter what level our "ability" may be, as ones who can achieve a surprising amount of multiplication of whatever we have to give, through the economy of Jesus.

Disciplines as risks: gambles of faith over cautious fear, a willingness to let go of the urge to preserve, seeing ourselves as ones capable of growing, multiplying and transforming. This parable is not about not knowing expectations. The master does not outline instructions when he leaves. Why not? Because we know what we are supposed to do! I know what I am supposed to do as a parent. We know what we are supposed to do as followers of Jesus, and as a church, at least in the big picture of it, maybe not always in the details. But sometimes we need to be jolted out of complacency by a challenging story, or the words of a challenging counselor, into doing what we know to do. And sometimes

the best way to jolt us out of complacency is to remind us that this matters. Ultimately. It matters to our kids that we do what we know to do. It matters to Jesus that we do what we know to do. It matters to Jesus because all of humanity matters to him and doing what we know to do will mean that we take risks for Jesus even when we are afraid of not knowing the right thing to do or say – which basically sums up all of my thinking and praying on what it means for me to be an anti-racist, as I believe Jesus calls me to be. If I don't say anything, I won't say the wrong thing, but I'll also never get it more right. And that we resist the urge to preserve the familiar that is no longer growing fruit for the kingdom, and in the 21st century church, that might be a lot of our work. And that we see ourselves as capable of being more than we see right now, because we see ourselves as God sees us. Which is another way of saying we won't be exactly as we were when God returns (however we mean that return) than we were at the beginning.

I know there are things that God has been wanting me to do, but I haven't done them because I am a very adept burier and preserver. I know there are things God has been wanting you to do, and for this church to do, but we haven't, because we are very adept buriers and preservers. So now to use some double positives, but God knows I know, and I know God knows. And God knows we know, and we know God knows. So what then if we don't get to it, if we just bury it and leave it?

It's not *not* about God's disappointment when we don't meet the expectations that God has for me and for us, and for our church. Ouch. Thanks be God. Let us pray.