

Don't Be Afraid
Matthew 25:14-30
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
October 15, 2023
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

In her introduction to this scripture, Maggie asked us to pay attention to what things in this reading caused a reaction in us. She also asked us to listen for something new. So, today, we are going to try to do both.

Let's start with the things that caused us to react...we feel them, so we might as well name them. And it is my guess that for many of us those things are toward the end of this parable. Perhaps we begin with the part where the slave who kept the money he was given safe, even though he didn't multiply it, was not celebrated, but instead criticized.

Or maybe what caught your attention is even closer to the end where this becomes more than name calling - more than a reaction of "You wicked and lazy slave!" and where that person was thrown "into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Let's be honest - we are not a people who understand God this way. We are not a people who embrace a God of punishment and damnation, a fickle God who decides, based on one experience or behavior, that people should be thrown out for good. So hearing that makes us at best uncomfortable and sometimes a little fearful.

And those might not be the only things that caused a reaction in you.

Did you hear verse 29? "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"? This doesn't sound like the Jesus we know...the Jesus who talks about how the last will be first, the Jesus who stands in the tradition of the prophets who proclaim that the hungry will be fed and the rich will go hungry, the Jesus whose own mother's song proclaims a future where the lowly are lifted up and the hungry are fed.

So there are many things here in today's passage that can upset our equilibrium.

These are things we will question. These are things we will wonder about. These are things we might never fully understand.

But, do you remember what else Maggie said? Listen for something new.

See often we read to the end of this parable and get overwhelmed by these things that seem out of character, and then we lose track of the story. In fact, in Bible study we wondered how we would hear this parable differently if it stopped at verse 25. Not that we get to choose which verses we include and which we don't - those decisions have

been made. But in asking this question it reminds us to go back and hear again where this parable started rather than to lose track of it because of a difficult ending. That question also reminds us to think critically about what we read.

So, what did this parable say?

A person - a rich person with slaves and property and wealth - was going to be away for a while. He gave some of his money - and, yes, while we use the word "talent" differently today, in the context of Jesus and the early church the word "talent" referred to money; it was a unit of measurement for money. And, it was a lot of money - "a talent was worth more than fifteen years' wages of a laborer" (footnote to Matthew 25:15 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Oxford University Press, 1991). So, this rich guy gave large sums of money to three of his slaves. And while he may have given some instruction, we are not told any of that - we are simply told that he entrusted his property to them according to their abilities.

The master was then gone for some length of time and when he returned each of the slaves came back to him and reported their earnings. Of course we hear that the first two both doubled what they had been responsible for. The third, however, comes with the original sum in hand. He was more of a "keep your money in the mattress rather than the bank" kind of guy.

Now usually when we read this we quickly move on to the master's negative reaction. And because of that we never question the perception of the master as harsh. But, if you were listening for something new, you might have noticed that it is only this third person who identifies him that way. There is nothing in what the first two slaves said or did to make us think the master is harsh. There is no description of him brought to us by some omniscient narrator who tells us he is a harsh and scary man.

Only the third person says this. Only the third person appears to fear the master's reaction. *And* only the third person, who was entrusted by the master in the same manner as the other two, behaves differently.

So, pausing with that...what might we wonder in light of it?

Well David Lose on his blog "...in the Meantime" writes, "What strikes me is how deeply affected the third servant is by his *perception* of the landowner. ...And here's the thing: I wonder how often this happens in our relationship with God. We imagine God primarily as an enforcer of rules, and we get hung up by the legalism of religion. We visualize God as stern and prone to punishment, and we come to believe that everything bad in our lives is punishment from God. We see God as arbitrary and capricious, and that's what we experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations.

"On the other hand, when we view God primarily in terms of grace, we are surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us.

And when we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives and to share it with others.

"What you see, all too often, is just what you get" [Pentecost 23 A: How Do You Imagine God? | ...In the Meantime \(davidlose.net\)](http://Pentecost23A.com).

What if at the heart of this parable isn't a requirement that we invest our money wisely, or a warning about what happens when we don't, or a threat that God might cut us off? But what if at the heart of this parable is an invitation to live in a loving relationship with God? What if at the heart of this parable is a reminder that when we embrace the grace and love and generosity of our God, we are more likely to live in those ways?

If you have taken Psychology 101 you have probably talked about the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy...the idea that what we believe or expect often comes true, not simply because it is true, but because our expectation creates or nurtures that reality.

How we understand God matters. It doesn't only matter because of eternal implications, but it matters because it changes how we live in this life, in this world, in relationship to other people, and in relationship to our resources whether those be money or abilities or time.

Friends, the world needs to know the God we have come to know...a God of love, a God of welcome, a God of acceptance, a God of affirmation. We heard Susan's witness to how important this message is when her letter was shared last week.

The world needs to know the God who we proclaim at the table each week...a God who makes room for everyone, no matter what.

The world needs to know the God who we understand as generous and compassionate...the God whose generosity and compassion toward us causes us to live that way toward others.

The world needs to know that God is not one to fear, but one whose love and grace are abundant.

I will likely always have some questions about this parable. I suspect you will, too. But when I look at the three servants in it, what I see is that one of them was so paralyzed by fear that he was unable to make a difference, while the other two were able to take risks for the expanding of their master's kingdom.

What if how we understand God really does matter? What if messages of God's abundant love really help us love more freely? What if a belief in God's generosity helps us become more generous? And what if, in embracing these things, love and grace and generosity just keep multiplying.

So often, fear seems to be a common response and yet again and again we hear, “Do not be afraid” - an invitation to embrace a way of wholeness and love, grace and generosity.

What if our conviction that God is filled with grace allows us to live gracefully in this world?

What if our conviction that God is a loving God gives us the opportunity to share an invitation with others, not to fear the judgment of God, but to welcome God’s warm embrace?

What if our conviction that God is a generous God gives us the opportunity to live, not tightly clenching our possessions, but to live generously with the world?

What if...