

Self-Fulfilling Prophecies and Other Crises of Faith
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Text

The Parable of the Talents

14 'For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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." ²¹His 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." ²²And 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." ²³His 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." ²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Prayer

Sermon

We are in the second to last Sunday of the liturgical year, almost ready to launch into Advent and a new Christian year. Although I have been meandering near and far from the weekly lectionary this fall, our Gospel reading is the one offered by the lectionary for today. It comes between the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, and the separation of the king's people into the sheep and the goats - the goats being cursed and sent to the eternal fire. And today's text, right in the middle, has a servant with seemingly good intentions thrown into outer darkness.

So, a cheerful trio of texts. You can tell why I am only preaching on one of the three. As a friend of mine said last week, the lectionary readings at the end of the liturgical year are kind of like overtired hungry toddlers - they need a timeout, a snack and a nap.

But I know there is good news in here somewhere, so hang in there with me.

All of the passages in Matthew 25 come just before the last supper and Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. In other words, this is Matthew's Jesus' last opportunity to teach his disciples how they should remain faithful when he is gone. This hyperbolic parable is an invitation to keep the faith even when Jesus is absent. Jesus is giving his followers pointers on how to live without him, and how to live through a time of profound crisis.

I don't know about you, but I could use some pointers for living through a time of crisis.

But I don't think the pointer is: assume judgment is coming.

Let's ponder this third servant for a moment.

I wonder, is he young? Is he new on the team? Has he ever been given such an important project at work before?

One thing we can guess from the text is that he's been given no instructions whatsoever.

He's just been handed a talent.

A talent was not just a little extra.

There's a lot of different ways to say how valuable a talent is. A talent in Jesus' day was worth a person's weight in gold; a talent today would be maybe a million dollars. And the landowner entrusted it to his servants. What I am saying is, it was a lot of money.

But actually it was more than money.

“The word used for “possessions” (hyparxonta) includes not only material goods but one’s entire substance and life. The man makes a sacrificial gift of epic proportions to his slaves, and then he leaves.”¹

Again, imagine this third slave, upon receiving one talent.

Have you ever been given something so precious to hold that it made you afraid?

It might be like the first time your sister let you hold her newborn baby, and then out of nowhere, she said, take care of him for a few days.

It might be as if you were learning cello in high school, and Yo-Yo Ma handed you his cello to hold on to for a little while.

It might be like your first boss saying, mind the store on the busiest day of the year.

It might be like Jesus saying, I’m giving my life so that you might have life. Do something good with it while I’m gone.

If I was this third servant, I would also have been afraid.

I think I might have done the very same thing he did: predict catastrophe if he messed up. But that prediction became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nowhere does the text say *why* he thought his master would be so harsh, but operating in fear of a harsh master, he preserved that precious talent instead of using it, and sure enough his master came back and punished him.

In the moment Matthew was telling this parable of Jesus, Jesus was gone. But into the hands of the early church was placed a talent beyond measure, the new covenant, the very promise of God, the Word of love, justice, hospitality, healing and mercy that was the message of Jesus. The master had risked everything and sacrificed everything to put this pearl of great price into the hands of the church. And they were called not to protect it but to multiply it.

And maybe that’s one of the pointers for living in a time of crisis, living in the in-between time without Jesus right here to advise. Could it even be a pointer for right this very moment?

¹ L Susan Bond, Preaching God’s Transformative Justice

This seems like the right time to batten down the hatches, protect our own, reserve our talents, turn inward.

This does not seem like the time to invite, to bless, to welcome, to heal, to practice justice.

This also *seems* like the right time for catastrophic thinking. I know, because I am an expert on catastrophic thinking! I mean, COVID!

But here's the thing.

In the words of Fannie Lou Hamer, "You can pray until you faint, but unless you get up and try to do something, God is not going to put it in your lap."

We've got to try.

Catastrophic thinking is a self-fulfilling prophecy. But *believing* love and kindness and mercy and justice and hope *is also* a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Now, let me be clear, I am not saying, everything's great, take off your masks and have thirty people over for Thanksgiving. (Please don't do that.)

But when we are given a gift as precious as God's love, even in the midst of a pandemic we're invited to multiply it.

Can I tell you some beautiful things?

This congregation made a decision early in the pandemic to live hopefully instead of worriedly. It was a financial decision but it was symbolic of so much more. If we're writing our own self-fulfilling prophecy it's one of blessing and promise, not catastrophe. And here's what it means right now. It means our attendance is up. It means people are coming to church who physically couldn't a year ago. It means we have folks coming in from four states getting a message of love and welcome and inclusion that they can take into their neighborhood. It means we have service project after service project going on because we know our neighbors need us more now than ever.

And we've got more to do. Here's one thing every one of us can do, now. Next week when you are thinking of how hard Thanksgiving is going to be without 14 people at your table, take a second for a good cry, but don't just turn inward into that sad place, that self-fulfilling prophecy of loneliness. Make the decision now that you will bring love and grace and kindness into the life of someone else who's feeling all the feels this

year. In the meantime, when we don't know what to do without our Teacher giving us instructions, as we're waiting in the in-between, as we're holding on for dear life waiting for a good vaccine, let's remember the talent, the precious and amazing gift of God's love, that we have been given, and consider it an invitation.

"Like the other parables... this is about how to live "in the meantime," until the Reign of God, or, as Marcus Borg always loved to say, the Dream of God, comes in its fullness."

So take the risk, and multiple the talent.

Amen.