

The Parable of the Talents
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The scripture I've chosen to preach on today is the Parable of the Talents. There are two different versions of this story in the bible, just like there are two versions of the creation story, and two versions of the birth story. Some people claim that whenever there are multiple versions of something in the bible, it means that the bible is contradicting itself and therefore the book is worthless, meaningless, or senseless. But I disagree. I think multiples versions of a story add to the depth of the meaning behind the story. I think that whenever there are different versions of a story in the bible, you should be aware of all the differences between the two stories and understand that both stories cannot be factually true and that neither story can be read completely literally. Instead I think each story contains bits of truth to be taken literally and bits of truth to be taken metaphorically or symbolically.

So first, let me tell briefly tell you both versions of the story.

First is from Matthew... Matthew 25:13-40

Second is from Luke... Luke 19:11-27

Back in April, I got the privilege of attending a UCC conference called Awakenings in Western Massachusetts. I went because Marcus Borg, one of my favorite theologians, was speaking. But I was surprised when my favorite lectures of the weekend were given not by Borg but by a theologian named Richard Rohrbaugh. What I liked best is that Rohrbaugh opened my mind and made me think about bible stories in a new way using historical and cultural context. And one of the stories he spoke about was the Parable of the Talents. So when Susan, Heike and I decided to preach on parables this summer, I knew immediately that I wanted to share these revelations about the parable of the talents with you. So I apologize if this sermon seems more like a bible study – but I just have so much wonderful information to share with you!

But before I do that, I want you all to think for a moment about what you think this story is about. If you've heard sermons about this parable, how has it been interpreted? The parables that Jesus told were often allegories. In the Parable of the Talents, the master and the servants are not actually a master or servants, but are symbols for something else. Who do you think the master represents? Who do you think the servants represent? Think back to what you've heard before, or what you initially thought when I read the stories to you.

I've heard a few sermons on this parable and have even preached my own, many years ago. To be honest, I've never really understood this parable, so like several other ministers I know, I twisted the words that Jesus actually said to fit a message that we think he would have actually given. For example, when I preached on this sermon in 2008, I twisted the word talent to mean an actual skill or talent, and that we are all given special skills, talents or gifts by God just like the master gave the servants the talents, and I preached that the two servants who used their talents and multiplied them were the heroes of the story whom we are supposed to emulate. I interpreted the master as being God and the servants as being all of us. But if you really read the story, this doesn't make any sense. First of all, a talent is a unit of money, not a special skill. And secondly, if God is the master in this story, God is very unjust, cruel, wicked. And I do not believe that Jesus would tell us a story about how God is evil. So I didn't really understand this parable until Richard Rohrbaugh's presentation, interpreting this story with historical and cultural context so that the meaning of the parable is something I think Jesus would have actually preached.

First Rohrbaugh reminded me that the bible is not a Western book. I think we all conceptually know this, but I think we forget what it means. The life and times of the people in the bible did not happen in America or anywhere in the Western world not anywhere near modern time. It is a Mediterranean Middle Eastern culture from 2000 years ago. This is an obvious fact, but we forget that this means that everything in the bible is completely foreign to us - the words, stories, symbols, references, grammar, the point of view and understanding and mindsets of the people, everything. Keeping this in mind, let us step in the Jewish peasant mind and lifestyle during the time that Jesus told this story.

1. In the peasant mindset, the world and everything in it can be understood as a limited good. Everything is in finite quantity, in short supply, and there is no way to increase the quantity of good things. There is a limited amount of money in the world, a limited amount of food, a limited amount of land; all these things just get divided, re-divided and redistributed, but not augmented. The pie is only so big; the pie cannot get any bigger, so the only way for some people to get more of the pie is if others get less of the pie. Therefore if you have a lot of something that is good, that means you took some away from someone else. And if you have very little of something then it is being taken away from you by the rich. So peasants believed that every rich person was a thief or the heir of a thief. So in Jewish thought, if you die richer than you were born, then you are a thief- reaping where you did not sow.
2. Also in the peasant mindset, gaining interest on money was against the law. And not just any law, but biblical law. Several places in Deuteronomy, it is written “Do not charge a fellow Israelite interest.” If someone loaned you money, they were not allowed to collect interest from you. Instead of putting money in a bank to collect interest, rabbinic law said that you should hide it in a cloth or bury it in the ground. The third servant did indeed do what the law said - put the money in a cloth and hid it in the ground. So the fact that the master suggested that the third servant should have collected interest on the money means that the master wanted the servant to break the law in order for the master to profit.

These mindsets are very different from American thought. We believe we can grow the pie, and almost every interaction with money we make nowadays involves interest. We cannot read this story with our understanding of money. Our capitalist mentality clouds our vision of what this scripture really means.

A couple of other facts:

1. Luke- minas- 400 times the daily wage
Matthew: talents- A talent is 60 minas, or 25000 times daily wage of a peasant-
Jesus is using hyperbole, or exaggeration to make a point.

2. In Luke's version, the master is a king whom his subjects did not like. Jesus is talking about Archelaus – the son of Herod the Great, who was sent to Rome to become king. People in Israel begged Caesar not to let him be king because they knew how completely unjust and cruel he was, but he became king anyways. Before setting out to Rome, he slayed nearly three thousand Jews. This king most definitely does not represent God, but the antithesis of God.

3. There is actually a third version of this parable, found in the Gospel of the Nazorean, one of the many, many gospels written about Jesus that were not included in our bible. In this version, the first two servants who made money off the investment were rebuked and sent to prison and the third servant was accepted with joy for not gaining interested and misusing money by gaining a profit off of other people's losses.

So the third servant did exactly what we was supposed to do. He is the true hero of the story because he does not break God's law and stands up to the aristocrat.

Rohrbaugh calls the Parable of the talents- homespun capitalism- it's a story of the ways in which unjust people used money to illegally gain a profit. The Master is not God and the two servants are not heroes- which is what is usually assumed.

The Master is a rich person, or a corporate powerhouse and the first two servants support the master. The third servant stands up to the injustices of the master and is the hero of the story, and is condemned for it. The third servant is the one we are to emulate. I also think the third servant represents Jesus. Notice when this story is told in the bible- directly before Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to be killed for standing up to the authorities for justice for all people.

I think this story has two lessons for us.... These are the two things I would love for you to take away from this sermon-

- 1- Read the bible within its historical and cultural context. So much of the bible cannot be read literally- and this is proven by the presence of multiple versions of stories within the text. We have to remember that Jewish peasants were not living in the modern capitalist

America. This is a fact that I wish more Americans realized. I think understanding this fact could help with gay rights, immigrant rights, rights and assistance for the poor like health care and welfare. Who knew that this one parable could have so many applications? Well, actually I think Jesus knew- this was the beauty of the parables he told- they have many layers of truth and meaning and application. These stories are timeless and can be applied in many different situations throughout time and history.

- 2- The other thing this story teaches us is the importance and yet also the huge risk, of standing up to power. You saw what happened to the third servant for standing up to the master. And we all know what happened to Jesus for standing up to unjust Roman and Jewish authorities. We all know what happened to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Abraham Lincoln, and Gandhi. I'm not advocating that we all go out and get killed. But I do think it's important for us to stand up to power when we can, even if it makes us a little uncomfortable, even if it puts us at a risk. Because if we don't do anything about the injustices we see, who will? If we don't stand up to the bullies, who will? If we don't stand up to our unjust bosses or abusive governmental powers, who will? God has no hands in the world but ours. No feet, no eyes, no ear, no mouth, but ours. Let us use our hands and feet and eyes and ears to make a difference in this world. Amen.

Benediction:

May we be God to others-

Beside others to befriend them

Behind others to encourage them

Before others to show them the way

We are God's hands and feet in this world. With the help and support of this faith community and our loving God, let us change the world. Amen.