



It's Absurd – Touchpoint for November 15, 2023

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

Grace and Peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

Steve Martin is one of my favorite comedians. He is both wacky and sophisticated in his humor. In one of my favorite bits, he said in the voice of a smooth-talking salesman, “You can be a millionaire and never pay taxes. Yes, you could be a millionaire and never pay taxes. First... Get a million dollars.” It was funny. There didn't need to be anything said for us to see the absurdity of his first step.

In the story of the talents, we also enter a world of absurdity. A talent would be equal to about two and a half million dollars today. It was measured in weight and a talent weighed about 57 pounds. That's an absurd amount of cash. Scholars have said to acquire that amount of wealth one would need to engage in ruthless and immoral methods including extortion and exorbitant interest.

So in essence, those who were given talents were told Steve’s joke and it was taken seriously. We don’t know the motivations of the first servant who acquired a great deal more. But what is known about the Roman culture is servants who were trusted, were often promoted to stewards, with more responsibility. Also, evidently, they wouldn’t be injured and sent into outer darkness, whatever that is.

With this understanding let’s reflect on one of the more popular interpretations of this parable you may have heard. Don’t neglect your spiritual gifts. Work hard like the prosperous first servant for there is no room for a lazy servant.

As with most parables, could this be an invitation to allow the absurd notions presented to stimulate a new way of thinking? If you are in this room live, or reading the Touchpoint, there's a good chance you are open to the possibilities. But our willingness can always be threatened by what causes discomfort and dis-ease. Anthony De Mello says, "You don't need strength; you don't need youthfulness. You don't need self-confidence. You need the willingness to think the unfamiliar. The willingness to see something new."

On face value, this parable appears to encourage iniquitous business practices. It encourages a system where the rewards go to those who are rich by any means. Go along to get along. For the wealthy of that time, the servant who acquired more wealth for his master was the hero. Could perhaps the peasants of that time see the last servant who spoke openly and honestly as the hero? After all, the story was being told to all the peasants who were following Jesus.

There appears to be a high value placed on success. Hmm Henry, *ya think?* Yes, I stated the obvious, but I did so because I think we ignore the obvious. We would rather lean into working our way into the kingdom. It sounds more responsible. What we avoid is the uncomfortable truth that the master, who many have associated with God, is unpredictable and potentially dangerous. The master is said to be generous and joyous with the ones who joins in his practices, and cruel and harsh to the one who did not. We must allow our dis-ease created by the nature of the parable to point us directly at the purpose of the parable, which is to draw us into a different way of thinking. Different in a way we may not have viewed God and the world around us before. But it's so uncomfortable! One of my favorite bumper stickers is, "Look busy, Jesus is coming," a response to the bumper sticker that read, "Jesus is coming."

The second coming of Jesus surrounds Matthew's parables, so we see why every parable has a tragic repercussion for somebody in the story. My suspicion is it's intended hyperbole. The end-times theology of my Jesus-movement days eventually became disturbing to me. It appeared to separate the good guys and the bad guys based upon their sin management. It appeared to emphasize works, such as eliminating bad works, and memorizing scripture.

End-times theology has always been what filters the world view of evangelical fundamentalists. Heaven or hell dualistic thinking has had, and still has, enormous negative impact in the U.S. Think about our stewardship of the earth. If the end-times are coming soon, and we're going to heaven with a new earth, go ahead suck out all the natural resources. We don't have to replenish.

Perhaps this story is inviting us to become dislodged from our attachment to systems that have been accepted or tolerated – both the external systems we've become accustomed to, and the "programs for happiness" we've created in our mind, as Anthony De Mello says. Either way the parable might be asking us to make a choice; not a choice between which servant's path to follow but instead, a decision to awaken to a new way of seeing.

What you see and what I see can be different. Now I'm uncomfortable. If there was a clearer message not left up to our interpretation, it might be declared as say, a sermon on some mount, or something like that. The parables are indeed designed to be prickly and perilous to our set ways of thinking.

Here is my personal touchpoint.

When the servant told the master that he knew how he was getting his money and refused to invest or trade, the master said, “Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Maybe the weeping and gnashing of teeth is the master’s version of King George’s song to the U.S. in Hamilton: “You’ll be back, soon you’ll see. You’ll remember you belong to me. You’ll be back, time will tell. You’ll remember that I served you well.”

Perhaps it’s not such a bad thing to be sent into someone else’s version of outer darkness. Some might call it civil disobedience.

Society would lead us to believe that adopting the ways of the master in this story is the right way. In a worldly sense, maybe this is true. But from a spiritual sense, maybe it’s riskier to gain the generosity and joy of a demigod than it is to know and speak the motivations of the heart. Some might see the last servant’s act, who buried the talent and then spoke what he thought of the master, as an act of disobedience. To be authentic.

Have you ever been cast out or rejected by a person or group because you couldn’t drink the Kool-Aid? Maybe marginalized by a church you once loved? Maybe you can identify with one of the servants in this story.

To paraphrase De Mello, it only takes a willingness to see things in a new way. This is what I like to tell my clients in AA. “You’re right, it’s not about willpower. Willpower doesn’t work. It’s our willingness and God’s power. If you are faced with repercussions for seeing things in a new way, you also may be invited into the ineffable presence and co-laboring nature of God, who is not anything like the master in this story.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for is the kingdom of heaven.”

The Message reads, “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort, and they are uncomfortable.”

Amen.

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taize Choir, Remember Me)

Be still, know that I am God

You Lord Are in this Place

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in 1)...this place.
2)...my heart. 3)...my mind. 4)...my life.
Your presence fills it.
Your presence is peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Lead Me, Lord

(Discovery Singers)

Lead me, Lord. Lead me in thy righteousness.
Make thy way plain before my face.
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord only, that makest me to dwell in safety.

The Meal

Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lukin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you.
And give you peace....
The Lord make his face to shine upon you.
And be gracious unto you.
The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen