

Proper 28A  
Stewardship Sunday  
The Rev. Emily Richards  
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*The Parable We Choose to Tell*

Every three years on this Sunday you can hear a collective groan from clergy. This parable is one of our least favorite to preach on. And because it always falls within Stewardship season, you'll hear a lot of preachers interpret the story through this particular lens. God has entrusted each one of us with "talents" (money, abilities, skills), and we are expected to invest those talents boldly for the sake of the Kingdom. If we do so, God will reward us. And if we don't, well there may be a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Over time I have become increasingly dissatisfied with this interpretation. The language of a God as a harsh and punitive slave master doesn't line up with the God of mercy and justice I experience through Jesus.

It doesn't make sense to the Rev. Debie Thomas, either. In her reflection on the passage she writes, "As I wrestled with this parable, I had a conversation with my son, who often asks me what Gospel texts I'm working on for my next essay. I read him the parable of the talents, fully expecting him to hate it — and he astonished me with his reaction: 'That's a great passage!' he said. 'It sums up everything Christianity is about. I love it!' Baffled, I asked him what exactly he 'loved.' 'Oh, isn't it obvious? I love how the third slave is the hero of the story!' Needless to say, my son's reaction to the parable sent me down a different path than I might otherwise have taken. As it turns out, it is very possible to read the third slave as the 'hero' of the story. Specifically, I think the parable works better if we read it *descriptively* rather than *prescriptively*. What if the parable is not about a punishing God at all? What if it's about us? What if it's about life on earth as it is, here and now?"

Looking at the story from the context of Jesus' day: a talent was worth an astounding amount - approximately twenty years of a laborer's wages. The wealthiest obtained such sums by loaning to the farmers. When a natural disaster hit, and the farmers couldn't pay back the interest incurred; they'd lose the only thing left - their land. The three slaves in the story are essentially the middlemen who oversee the land and the workers, collect the debts for the wealthy masters all the while making a little extra on the side. Knowing full well what it may cost him, the third slave buries the talent in the earth, literally taking it out of circulation, so that it will do no further harm to the poor. He chooses to opt out of the unjust and exploitative system in which he has colluded with his greedy master.

“What if my son was on to something,” the Rev. Thomas continues? “Maybe this isn’t a parable about the coming kingdom of God. Maybe this is a parable about the world we occupy right now. A parable about what faithfulness looks like in hard, hidden places. A parable about our complicity, and the high stakes involved in ending it, one about opting out of systems of oppression and exploitation — even and *especially* when we are accustomed to benefiting from such systems and interrupting “business as usual” for the sake of justice and mercy. A parable about turning reality upside down in the name of love.”

Micah’s prophetic words to the people of Israel echo the teaching of the parable of the talents. What does the Lord require? Right worship? Right praise? Right belief? No. Our faithfulness is revealed in our compassion. Micah pleads with his people to live in God’s love, becoming agents of God’s mercy, breaking free from the systems that promote oppression over justice. This past week, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, died unexpectedly. He was an influential voice on the moral, ethical and religious issues of our time. In his book, [To a Heal a Fractured World](#), Sacks believed that “Greatness, even for God, and certainly for us, is not to be above people but to be with them, hearing their silent cry, sharing their distress, bringing comfort to the distressed and dignity to the deprived. The message of the Hebrew Bible is that civilizations survive not by strength but by how they respond to the weak; not by wealth but by how they care for the poor; not by power but by their concern for the powerless. What renders a culture invulnerable is the compassion it shows to the vulnerable.” To do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God is the way communities and societies flourish. Concern for the welfare and well-being of the marginalized heals our fractured world.

On second thought maybe the parable of the talents does have something important to say to us in Stewardship season. If stewardship is our grateful response to God’s love and faithfulness in our lives, then, standing up to unjust systems in our society is a tangible expression of our gratitude. It is a way of ensuring that others be given the same opportunity to experience the fullness of God’s abundance and goodness as we have. Stewardship puts into practice the prophetic message.

In the midst of isolation, economic instability and social upheaval, this year has taught me what faithfulness looks like in hard and hidden places. Our parish could have easily hunkered down and responded out of a sense of scarcity and fear, rather than generosity. You could have chosen to think only about your own well-being and the well-being of your families. Instead, you chose a different way. As the anxiety increased amid the pandemic, your commitment to St. Peter’s never wavered. Because of your generous gifts, our church has been able to keep doing what love requires of us by nurturing life-giving, joyful ministries both inside and outside the church walls. While our buildings were

closed, our hearts remained open to meet the needs of our community - to embody that compassionate presence of our loving and merciful Savior. If anything, this year has given us a newfound appreciation for our faith community; and how much it matters to the healing of our fractured world.

Although we continue to face a future marked by challenge and uncertainty, I pray we remain confident in God's promise to keep us connected to one another and to give us the strength for the journey ahead. May our lives lived in love become the parable of God's kingdom we tell for generations to come. *Amen.*