

“A Talent for Love”

Once again we are on the allegory train. In light of last week’s sermon, it will not surprise you to hear that I am not fond of allegory. This is especially true when the allegory seems so facile. Interestingly this allegory has had two major streams of interpretation over the centuries.

One stream is what I expect many of us heard growing up. That is, that the property owner in the story is Jesus. His going away for a long time is the time after his resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven. His return is the second coming. The three slaves represent his followers—people like you and me. Each of the three is given a portion of the property owner’s wealth to care for while he is away. That is, each follower is given some ministry or part of the Kingdom of God to care for in the absence of Jesus. It is convenient that the sum of money the slave is to care for is called a talent or in Greek *talanton*. A *talanton* in biblical times was worth about twenty years’ wages for a laborer. So this is not an insignificant sum of money that has been entrusted to each of these slaves.

Interestingly, over time the word talent has come to mean a particular aptitude or skill, due to the interpretations of this story. Therefore, each slave is given a sum of money in accordance with the talent or skill he has.

The one given charge five talents doubles the amount over time. Likewise, the one with two talents doubles the value. They were entrusted with a portion of the kingdom and have grown that over time. But the other slave is lazy and/or fearful, He hides his portion of Jesus’ ministry and thus nothing comes of it.

The moral is beware that we do not squander the Kingdom of God, for there will be hell to pay upon Jesus’ return.

Another traditional interpretation makes the productive slaves heirs of the New Testament while the unproductive one is heir to the Old Testament—that is a Jew. A sect of Judaism in the aftermath of the Great Jewish War and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, were purported to have sought to “put a fence around the Torah” so that it would never change. Thus they miss the Good News of Jesus Christ and are punished upon Jesus’ return.

Honestly, I am not fond of either of these interpretations. They are punitive and in the wrong hands the second one is anti-Semitic. They also make Jesus’ return something to beware of rather than something to long for. However, they are consistent with what we hear from prophets in the Old Testament. That is that “The Day of the Lord” could be a good day, but not if people keep on ignoring God and God’s authority in the world. Then it will be a day to fear. But the prophets always made it clear that there was time to repent, up to the very last moment. Something missing in this story.

There is another interpretation that I would like to suggest. Let’s look more closely at the response of the third slave to the returned property owner.¹ When he is called to account he says, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid” Why

¹ Thanks to David Lose and his website “...in the Meantime” for suggesting this interpretation.

does the third slave say this? Up until this point in the story there is nothing to suggest that that property owner is evil, covetous, or a usurper.

First of all, the property owner entrusts each slave with huge sums of money, from twenty years' to a hundred years' worth of wages. Then he goes away for a long time, yet another example of his trust. When he returns and asks what has been done with his property he is inquisitive but not particularly demanding. Of course, when he finds out that the first two slaves have double his wealth he is grateful and welcomes them in to "the joy of their master." It is only when the third slave tells him that he is harsh and essentially steals from other people that the property owner shows any anger. Honestly who wouldn't show surprise and anger in the face of the third slave's accusations? What is up with this fellow that he is so afraid?

Here our allegory takes a different turn. The slave is neither a lazy Christian nor a fearful Jew. Rather he is one who has misread scripture, in particular the Hebrew Bible. Remember in Jesus' time the only sacred scriptures were what we would call the Old Testament. I will argue with my dying breath that the God of the Old Testament is not a mean and wrathful god, but that is a subject for another day. This fellow may see God as mean, as do many modern believers. He has latched on, to the exclusion of all else, to the disasters and punishments apparently meted out by God in the Hebrew Bible. He is afraid and incapacitated.

Perhaps you remember a time when you worked for a boss who was capricious or punitive. After a while, you do not know what to do. You don't know what is right and what is wrong. It becomes increasingly hard to make decisions and to take initiative. Working for such a person can be incapacitating.

This third slave seems to be in just such a predicament, at least in his own mind. Rather than be concerned about how we handle investments in the Kingdom of God, perhaps we need to be aware of our perceptions of God. Is God so godawful mean that we needed to be saved from God by Jesus? We may not think that explicitly, but when we talk about not liking the Old Testament and preferring the New Testament God that is what we are implying. Do we think that God is so bloodthirsty and in need of sacrifice that God sends the eternal son into the world to take on our sins and die in bloody misery to satisfy God's needs? Did Jesus come to save us from God? as Rob Bell once asked.²

In a little book that I have been reading about God's will³ the author points out that God's will for humanity is to love God. God's intent for the son was that we would follow him. God's ultimate will is not for misery, fear, or punishment. Often our perception is that something was God's will when it never was, but we put it on God as a way of explaining the unexplainable and of dealing with the misery and fear that confound us.

Brothers and Sisters it is not Good News if the result is making God into a monster and our worship of such a monster having to be mediated by the son that God murdered. If we hold onto such latent fear of the Holy One now is the time to start reforming those ideas. We are coming to the end of the church year and the beginning of the new church year. As we await the coming of the Christ child we can ask ourselves, "Who is this God that came to us not as a wrathful warrior but as a little

² *Love Wins* by Rob Bell ©2011

³ *The Will of God* by Leslie D. Weatherhead ©1944.

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child born to poor parents in a humble manger?" We ponder that this is the very same God of the entire biblical narrative from creation in Genesis to re-creation in Revelation. We can remember that looking at the entire arc of the biblical narrative helps us to see the fullness of God and to be in awe of the one that can create, sustain and redeem all of creation, not out of obligation but out of love for each part of it, including you and me.