



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

The World's Two Stories...and the Church's Third

November 29, 2017

Matthew 25.14-30

A landowner, deciding to go on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave an amount of money equal to 75 times his annual wage; to another he gave an amount of money equal to 30 years wages, and to another 15 years wages, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the larger amount invested his money at once, doubling it. In the same way, the one who had received the second largest doubled his. But the one who had received the least amount dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. The master said to the first two, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have done what I asked in this small matter so I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' Then the third slave said to the master, '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, and I went and hid your money in the ground. I give you back what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you not, that I reap profits where I did not even invest, and received income even when I did nothing to get it? 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.

Then he ordered that the money given to the third slave be taken from him and given to the first slave, saying "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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Tao Te Ching 17

There are four types of leaders;

The best leader is indistinguishable from the will of those who selected her.

The next best leader enjoys the love and praise of the people.

The poor leader rules through coercion and fear.

And the worst leader is a tyrant despised by the multitudes who are the victims of his power.

What a world of difference among these leaders!

In the last two types, what is done is without sincerity or trust---only coercion

In the second type, there is a harmony between the leader and the people.

In the first type, whatever is done happens so naturally that no one presumes to take the credit!

(translated by Ralph Alan Dale)

And so we have a landowner and his slaves in this parable. It follows last week's parable about the ten young women who had forgotten their iPhone recharging cords and batteries, being as enigmatic as that one, offering several layers of interpretation. We have heard many sermons on the value of increasing our talents, and indeed, that is one way to look at it. The master values those who improve and increase what has been given to them.

But there's another way to look at this parable, and, like a carpet with a deep, rich pile, what we see depends on the perspective from which we are looking. This is a story about a ruthless master who, according to the text, takes advantage of people, who uses his authority to intimidate his inferiors, a man who profits from other peoples' misfortunes, a master who demands that those who work for him mirror the same ruthless attitude. This guy gives money to three of his subordinates, without instructions, and leaves, only to return, demanding an accounting of what he's given them. The first two bring a sly grin to his face, for they, like he, have been ruthless in their business dealings, taking advantage of others to turn a profit on what the master had given them. But the third, rebelling against the master's way of doing business and in protest of his master's greed and manipulation, getting things he doesn't deserve and reaping a windfall at others' expense, just buries the money without making any profit on it. It's his way of showing disapproval of his boss's underhanded way of doing business. And true to character, the master takes away from the poor man all that he has and gives it to the two other dudes who have made their boss very rich indeed. The master knows the first two will not cross him and will do whatever it takes to make him wealthy. If that sounds vaguely familiar, you only need to read the news of the past week and you get a picture of what some politicians want to do to the least of these.

Taking a page from Matthew's playbook, Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields Cathedral in London, comments on the strange times in which we find ourselves these days. Against the backdrop of fake news, alternative facts, child abuse by politicians and Hollywood stars, tax cuts for the wealthy, and a host of other aberrations of acceptable social mores, he observes that we are living amid two overlapping stories in this world that has us so befuddled.

(Christian Century, November 8, 2017)

The first, he says, is the freedom story. Once upon a time we lived in a class-ridden, race-dominated, and gender-constrained society. But gradually the inhibitions of power, privilege, and prejudice began to be dismantled by technology, globalization, and finance. The logic of the freedom story assumes that through technology, globalization, and finance we will all be free. This logic was exposed for naught after 9/11 with the eruption on the global stage of a ruthless, uncompromising, fanatical rejection of everything the freedom story stands for. And after the 2008 global crash of the economy, the freedom story was fatally damaged. Finance turned from a mechanism for promoting the public good to a corrupt indulgence that poisoned the public water. The very technology that had promised to unlock and empower, was equally capable of impoverishing and marginalizing by outsourcing and making many without jobs.

The second story is the slavery story, Wells says. Once there were stable communities where people earned a decent living. They had family living close by. They could expect to work in the same line of business all their life, buy and embellish their own homes, and enjoy a few years of respectable retirement. Free education meant that if their children did well, they could make a better life for themselves, near or far.

But the building blocks of this stable life have been undermined and its more modest freedoms taken away. This mix of profound inequality and simmering distrust creates fertile soil for ideologies of hate that assign blame, like the master in our story. The slavery story also identifies an important truth: that the great liberating forces of technology, globalization, and high finance have paradoxically made slaves of us all.

The implication for people of faith is critical, for the question is not whether outside forces have power over us, but rather: are we going to allow ourselves to be possessed by these pernicious and deceitful powers? Both the freedom story and the slavery story are ultimately false stories, like false calories in a candy bar. One says that, left to ourselves, we will realize all our dreams. The other says that every story is really a conspiracy story and all our troubles are someone else's fault.

The church, however, offers a third story. For people of faith, Christianity is fundamentally a story about where we're going. We are on a journey through life in the company of God's grace, fostering the harmony of the restored creation, through the mercy of God's unconditional love, building the bridge that spans the deep abyss even as we walk on it. It means embracing the truth that life is a team game, and in the end, God will have nothing to say to us if we think we can come without the others.

This is not a time to despair. It's a time to put into action both perspectives of Matthew's story in a meaningful way, namely that we multiply what has been given to us, but rather than handing it over to the greedy masters of freedom and slavery, we distribute it equitably among those who need it. Society needs faith communities to live the third story, namely that our hope is in something and someone larger than freedom or slavery. The church offers a countercultural community built on relationship, trust, mercy, love and acceptance, multiplying talents in response to a loving God, co-creating with God a world as God would have it.

This is why I value this church community. This is why we support children coming together to sing. This is why we celebrate a choir, an organ, and pianos. Here we learn to create rainbows with broken crayons, fostering joy that transcends the need to be totally free or find perfection in politics. And so today, as we go into this week of Thanksgiving, celebrating the joyous music of singing children; it's Wonder-Beautiful! And tinkling piano keys, and choral anthems that empower us to all praise God and sing. We go out giving thanks with music on our lips and a song in our hearts as players in the third story of hope and peace. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann