

Things Fall Apart
Pentecost 24A
PPC
15 November 2020

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

It could be me, standing there, spade in hand, using all my strength to break through the dry, hard ground, to fashion a small hole in which to place my talent. The evening air is crisp and cool now that the sun has set. My lantern is hanging close by so that I can see where I'm digging. Afraid that someone will see me, even in the safety of the dark, I want to get the talent hidden quickly so it will be safe. My fear motivates me to dig faster and deeper.

Yes, I'm that third slave, the one with little power or money. I live from paycheck to paycheck, have no savings, afraid of losing my job because then I'll lose my health insurance. For sure, I have nothing invested in the stock market. A talent could feed my family for years, not to say helping them with the heat costs in the winter and fuel for cooking. One talent is more money than I ever hoped to see in my lifetime. Why risk losing all when I have nothing? I am afraid.

It's important to remember that parables are stories with layers. For we, who breathe the very air of capitalism, this story could sound like a warning to invest our money well. Would Jesus have been talking about how to accumulate wealth as he is in the midst of the final week of his life? The story isn't about money, of course. Its meaning goes much deeper than a tale of cash and bank balances. Jesus is taking a big risk as he nears his death. Would Jesus be talking about a God who throws those who invest badly into the outer darkness? As Jesus prepares to leave his earthly ministry, he uses these stories to address the things that are uppermost on his mind.

I read this week, a story that Kurt Vonnegut told about himself. “When I was about 15,” he related, “I spent a week working on an archeological dig.” In a conversation he had with one of the archeologists one day, he was asked the typical questions often asked of teenagers. “Do you play a sport? What’s your favorite subject?” Kurt replied, “no, I don’t play sports. I do theater; I’m in choir, I play the violin and piano; I used to take art classes.” His questioner went “WOW. That’s amazing.” Kurt replied, “Oh, no, but I’m not very good at ANY of them.”

The archeologist’s reply to this response from Kurt was one Kurt never forgot. He said, “I don’t think being good at things is the point of doing them. I think you’ve got these wonderful experiences with different skills, and that all teaches you things and makes you an interesting person, no matter how well you do them.”

Vonnegut says that reply changed his life. He went from being a failure, someone who hadn’t been talented enough at anything to excel, to someone who did things because he enjoyed them. “I had been raised in such an achievement-oriented environment,” he says, “so inundated with the myth of Talent [with a capital T] that I thought it was only worth doing things if you could “Win” at them.”¹

This parable does make a dramatic statement as Jesus uses sums of money that would have been fantastical to his hearers. How much, I wonder, would it take to impress us today when even a “trillion dollars” has lost its impact? What does it say that the master gives the talents not equally to the three slaves but to each “according to his ability”. The word translated as “ability” is *dynamis* which translates more faithfully to the word “power”. Intriguing question, isn’t it, to speculate on what the

¹ www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=3993991527281978&set=a.

phrase means? Is that like trickle down economics? When you have billions, your investments accrue more rapidly. It's like giving billionaires tax breaks and taking SNAP benefits away from the needy. What does power mean in relation to your economic and social status? Was the third servant set up to fail? Were his cowardice and lack of creativity predictable?

What if Jesus' message in this parable is that those wealthier slaves were the villains of the piece because the rich get richer at the expense of the poor?

Reading commentary from scholars from other cultures is also helpful in widening our lens. From the standpoint of an African commentator, he believes we have attributed words to Jesus that are actually the words of the master. In a time when those with wealth and power used that to take advantage of the less wealthy and powerful (oh, and isn't it wonderful how times have changed?!), Jesus is telling a story about a man with little power standing up to the powerful and being willing to risk his life to do so. The master gets mad at the third servant, the one who has been set up, and tries to shame him by taking away (read "stealing") his possessions and then giving them to those who are already rich. It's not a parable about how to invest in the stock market at all.

Isn't it interesting that already the poor are being called "wicked and lazy"? Those stereotypes are old. It's like when we say to the poor "Get a job" or "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps". If your job pays minimum wage you can't afford the rent on a one bedroom apartment anywhere in this country, are you lazy? Then, we look down upon those who take those jobs. If you don't have boots, how will you pull yourself up?

What of that third slave? This parable is really about the relationship between the master and that slave. He does not squander this talent or use it for his own benefit and he does return the talent to his master. His actions, though, are apparently driven by fear. The emotion that drives the third slave creates the conditions that lead to his downfall. Fearing his master, that which he fears is realized. One commentator writes, “Perhaps, for Matthew, the God we face is the one we imagine.”²

We live in an age that breathes fear. There have been many times before this when fear has ruled the world but right now we are facing fears that feel inescapable. The invisible corona virus that could cause us to die. Close to 300,000 of us have already died. We are told to stay in our homes. As we approach Thanksgiving and Christmas, this edict makes us sad because we can't be with all our family in ways that are traditional for many of us. Christmas Eve on Zoom is just wrong. Some of us are reacting out of fear by rebellion - “no one is going to tell me to wear a mask”. Most of us, thank God, have collected masks for all occasions and are wearing them. But we are afraid. Violence in our country has escalated and those in leadership positions are responsible for inciting the anger of white supremacists. They play on their fear that in only a decade whites will not be the majority in this country.

Will we be ruled by fear? Faithful living is not static. Yet, like the third slave we are good with knowing but not doing. We hold onto what we have because we are afraid of being cast out into the outer darkness with nothing. We know what faithful living looks like but we are afraid to share what we have. We bury our talents of love, goodness, time and treasure in the ground for that rainy day. Perhaps we feel that our

² *Feasting on the Word, Yr. A, Vol. 4*, Mark Douglas, Theological Perspective, pg. 312.

talent is too small to make a difference. Or, we may feel resentment or jealousy about another's wealth. It is exactly those feelings that paralyze the third slave in this parable. He distrusts his master and lives in fear of what the master may do. As a result, he rejects the master's graciously given opportunity and so is severely punished.

What we think about God and *do* in response to our master's gracious trust is not incidental. We have real choices and power. There will be consequences to how we use our freedom. What we do or fail to do shapes the world. Our failure to act may cast us into the outer darkness.

Will we hold onto our church investments, afraid that if we spend anything we will in the end, have nothing? Are we afraid of dwindling resources and so we act out of a sense of scarcity? Are we so afraid of the church ceasing to be the church we've always had that we want to bury our talent? We seem to be prone to regard stewardship as a way of keeping our resources safe. We hide them away. What if we imagine good stewardship as wise and generous spending of our resources no matter how risky that feels? What if it's done with faith and hope and imagination and creativity? Those are the vows that the officers of our church have taken - to serve us with love and hope and imagination and creativity.

Could it be that we bury our faith, our relationship with God, the gospel itself? Do we tuck that away in some hidden place only to be taken out on Sundays and in emergency situations? Or is our whole life transformed by living out our baptisms, by responding every day to the call of our Stillspeaking God?

John of the Cross wrote "In the evening of life we will be judged on love alone." Do we see the world in terms of what we lack or in terms of possibilities for growth and

transformation? When things fall apart are we quick to blame others, seeing life in terms of the bottom line? Does the current perception of our resources as barely adequate to meet our needs reflect reality or despair?

Over the millennium I hear God's voice echoing in the burning bush throughout the wilderness, speaking to us and saying, "I am who I am". We're not going to get the "right" answers or always be entirely successful. We must rely on our God given talents. Life isn't about everything working out like a Charles Dickens' novel, although there are many days when I wish it was. We aren't failures if we try something and it doesn't work.

What we learn from these stories Jesus tells us, though, is that we don't need to be afraid. What do we have to lose? Let's be on fire with God's love so that we are the blessings to this world that the world so desperately needs.

AMEN.