

Sermon, November 15, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome our good friends Debi and Sean Beachy, who are providing Special Music. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume public worship. New pandemic infections, hospitalizations and deaths are at record highs. Both the CDC and our own ELCA say people who are at high risk for serious illness from Coronavirus should NOT attend indoor worship services in person, and those who regularly spend time with families or friends in high risk groups shouldn't either.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily. Which is why we are here, worshipping together even though safely apart. Meanwhile, if you want to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com. You can also now donate through our Facebook page.

Now today's stupid joke.

According to First Timothy, the LOVE of money is the root of all evil. But Mark Twain said in his experience, evil comes mostly from the LACK of money, not so much the love of it. Jackie Mason said LOVE is the most important thing in the world, not Money. But then he added: Fortunately, I LOVE money. Henny Youngman asked, "What's the use of happiness? It can't buy you money." Hold that thought.

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

Almighty and ever-living God, before the earth was formed and even after it ceases to be, you are God. Break into our short span of life and let us see the signs of your final will and purpose, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the 25th chapter.

[Jesus said to the disciples]"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.' 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.'

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.' 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.'

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 seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 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? 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.

So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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.'

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Like today's stupid jokes, the Parable of the Talents is all about money. And LOTS of it. The talent, or in the original Greek τάλαντον, was a measure of silver equal to twenty years' wages for the average worker. Today in the U.S, that would be more than a million dollars. So it seems odd up front that ANY master would leave town trusting eight million dollars to his slaves.

Especially since δούλοι or "slaves" in the first century Near East were usually people working off debts after defaulting on loans. Don't know about you, but that's not the sort of person I'd trust my fortune with.

More than a few preachers this morning will say Jesus wasn't really talking about money. They're saying by "talents" he meant "skills, or gifts or special abilities." Sorry, but that's wrong. Because it is only since the sixteenth century that the word "talent" could mean any of

those things. In fact, etymologists say the word “talent” crept into the English language from this very parable. Probably from all those sermons by pastors who, like me, couldn’t believe Jesus would actually praise those who make the most money. Which today in Matthew, he apparently DID. And then went on to imply that successful people are the ones God rewards, while those less fortunate will be condemned to weeping and gnashing their teeth.

And that’s not the only troubling thing I find in the Parable of the Talents. If the master is allegorically God, or maybe Jesus returning at the end times, this parable presents him as a figure who is harsh, cruel, unforgiving, greedy; mean-spirited and vindictive.

Cultural anthropologists agree this would have been a horrible story to tell first century Near East peasants. They say folks back then viewed wealth as finite and already distributed. Unlike today’s Western World where we like to think everyone can succeed if they just work hard enough, back then and over there people thought what you had is pretty much what you were supposed to have. For one to MAKE money, it had to come at the expense of someone else, so ALL gains were viewed as ill-gotten. Of course they had it wrong, but so do we. Because lots of people work hard these days yet still struggle to keep a roof over their heads and food on the table.

To the ancients, however, this parable would have meant that evil and greed will succeed in the end, while honesty and virtue will be punished. It turns out I’m not the only one bothered by the Parable of the Talents. Because many if not most New Testament scholars through the centuries have struggled with it.

Perhaps the first to voice his concerns publicly was a rather fascinating fellow named Eusebius, who lived way back in the late third and early fourth centuries. A Roman citizen of Greek descent, Eusebius was probably the most learned historian and Christian biblical scholar of his time.

While we Lutherans like to think we founded modern biblical scholarship three or four centuries ago, that distinction probably should go to him. Eusebius was born in coastal Caesarea Maritima, a city known for its vast library and as a center of Christian learning.

He became Caesarea's Bishop sometime after co-founding a school of biblical studies with his teacher and mentor Pamphilus. The two were known to hand out bibles to poor folks who otherwise couldn't afford them. They even gave Bibles to women and taught them how to read them. Teaching women to read was pretty scandalous back in those days.

The preserved written corpus of the works of Eusebius includes multi-volume writings with titles like, "Demonstrations of the Gospel," "Preparations for the Gospel," and "Discrepancies among the gospels." In the "discrepancies" Eusebius drew on his vast knowledge of history and culture to explain how context probably shaped and influenced the unique focus and theological slant each gospel seems to have. (If you attend St. Mark's Adult Forum, you know someone else who teaches those same concepts. ME!!!!!!)

Probably no biblical text bothered Eusebius more than Matthew's Parable of the Talents. He described it as a flawed version of parables that appear in the gospel of Luke as well as the non-canonical Gospel of the Nazoreans—a work that eventually fell out of favor and is now lost to us.

Eusebius noted a close connection between Matthew and Nazoreans. He wasn't sure if one was based on the other or if maybe they had common sources—a question scholars still debate and probably will never know for sure. Eusebius eventually concluded that Matthew's Parable of The Talents had somehow been corrupted as it was handed down by word of mouth over several generations.

According to him, it would make no sense for Jesus to condemn the third slave in the parable. In the Nazorean version, the five-talent slave squandered his master's money in the interim feasting and partying with the decadent and drinking with the drunken. He is said to have spent his master's fortune mostly on harlots and what the text calls *alhtai*, which literally means "Flute girls." "Flute girls?"

For his irresponsible behavior, the Nazorean parable says the first slave was admonished and thrown into prison. The two-talent slave was also called on the carpet and rebuked for putting his master's money at risk.

That third slave in the Gospel of the Nazoreans-- the one who buried the single talent in the ground-- is actually commended. In fact, the master honors and rewards him for being cautious and protective of a treasure that he knew didn't belong to him. And that makes much more sense to me because lending money at interest as the so-called "master" suggested actually violates the laws of Torah—which were clearly well-known to Matthew's first readers of Jewish Christians. In fact, burying money in the ground was exactly what the rabbis of the Talmud suggested people do to keep it from being stolen.

No wonder Eusebius thought Matthew got it wrong. Especially since the returning master admonished and condemned the meek and cautious servant, saying "to those who have, more will be given" and "to those who have nothing, even that will be taken away."

That doesn't sound at all like Matthew's Jesus back in chapter five's Sermon on the Mount. That's where he promised "the first will be last and the last will be first;" and the poor in spirit, the meek and those who mourn and are frightened are the very sorts of people who are, in the end, blessed. Not cursed.

Eusebius thought Matthew's parable as written would have sent an awful message to the peasants to whom it was presumably told.

That in the end God will treat the poor just as badly as the rich usually treat them. In the end, Eusebius hoped Matthew was just awkwardly using a rare literary and rhetorical device called an “epanalepsis.” That’s where the last words in a story actually refer to the first characters in that story. Well maybe.

But I think there’s another possibility. Last week’s parable of the ten bridesmaids began with Jesus saying, “The Kingdom of heaven will be like this.” And that was the tenth kingdom parable that Matthew’s Jesus started with those words. Today’s parable did not start out that way. So maybe Matthew was talking about a different kingdom altogether.

Because God surely will NOT operate like the master in this awful parable. Matthew’s God as described by Jesus in chapter five is the one who provides sun and rain for everyone. The God who feeds and clothes even those who have little faith according to chapter six. The God Jesus describes in Matthew is like a parent, who gives only good things to his children according to chapter seven.

In fact, the God Jesus describes in Matthew cares so much about every single one of us that he even keeps track of the number of hairs on our heads according to chapter ten; and is also the sort of God who, like a shepherd, would drop everything and race to the rescue, should even one member of his precious flock become lost.

In fact, the kingdom Jesus describes elsewhere in Matthew doesn’t operate on merits and rewards, or misdeeds and punishment. It operates instead on mercy and grace. Where sinners, strangers and the marginalized will be welcomed ahead of the likes of Pharisees and scribes and temple authorities who mistakenly consider themselves more worthy.

Left to our own devices, none of us could ever earn the kingdom of heaven any way. But as Matthew repeatedly reminds us, we are not left to our own devices. The kingdom for us has already been earned. By

the love and self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So if the Parable of the Talents IS about a kingdom, it's certainly not the next one. In fact it sounds more this one. Because ours is the realm where the poor continue to suffer as the rich get richer.

And it is THIS world where people are valued for what they have, rather than who they are. For what is in their wallets, rather than what is in their hearts. Where the meek, the sick, the marginalized and the poor remain untouchables-- invisible to so many. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew Jesus told the crowd "the Kingdom of heaven will be like so many wonderful things. And maybe the purpose of THIS parable was to assure us that, "Thankfully it will NOT be much like this one."

I hope someday archaeologists unearth an intact copy of the Gospel of the Nazoreans. I'd like to read ITS Parable of the Talents, where Jesus commends rather than condemns the humble, fearful slave who had nothing. That sounds more like the Jesus I know.

And while I'm at it, I wouldn't mind learning a little more about those flute girls too. Amen.