

“Preconceptions”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on November 13th 2011 (22nd Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 25: 14-30

The 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel...the 25th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew...plays, in all sorts of ways, a unique role...a unique role...in that rich library of writings we call the New Testament. It is unique, in the first place, in that it brings together three magnificent parables, two of which are found only in Matthew. (The exception is this morning's parable, which is also found in Luke). It is unique, as well, because it forms the final segment of the fifth of five discourses Jesus offers us through Matthew: discourses that give a shape to Matthew that sets it apart from the other three Gospels. It is unique in that the three-chapter discourse it brings to its climax plays a role at the *end* of Matthew not unlike the role the lengthy three-chapter Sermon on the Mount plays at the *start* to Matthew's Gospel. Finally...finally...in my humble opinion it gives to Matthew's account of the story that immediately follows, that of Christ's passion—Christ's arrest and trial and execution—the 25th chapter of Matthew lends to Matthew's account of the passion a particular weightiness...a particular weightiness...since it comes on the heels of three parables that pack such a dramatic punch. And let's be clear on this much:

There is nothing accidental in Matthew having grouped together the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins, the parable of the talents and the parable of the Last Judgment. There is nothing accidental about these three parables forming a group within the confines of Matthew's Gospel...nor is there anything accidental about the fact that Matthew places them right at the end...just before Christ's death. All three of them are meant to shake our complacency. All three of them are meant to leave us with some soul-searching, with some personal inventory-taking...at a bare minimum, all three are meant to leave us at least a wee bit less complacent, than prior to our having encountered them.

That is certainly true of this morning's parable, the second of the three. We tend to call it the Parable of the Talents which, I think, is an especially happy name for it in the English language, since it invokes the fact that the word ``talent``—largely through the telling and re-telling of this parable—has come to connote not only an ancient unit of money (which is its basic meaning in the parable) but also gifts, abilities, aptitudes and capacities which we either succeed—or fail to succeed—in cultivating. And so the parable is rightly known as the Parable of the Talents...although it could just as easily be known as the Parable of the Three Servants.

Is it just me...or do others also tend to see either Woody Allen or Buster Keaton playing the role of that hapless third servant?

Call it what you will...the parable most certainly does turn on the behaviour of that third servant, in contrast to that of the other two. As is so often the case in a good folk-story, the number three is a pivotal number, in part because it represents the smallest odd number: in other words, a small number that cannot be easily divided in half! And so, as the parable will have it, two of the three servants succeed in pleasing their master; the third fails rather badly. Nor is there any subtlety in the punishment that third servant receives for his troubles! *Take the talent from him...*

...bear in mind that he had only been entrusted with one measly talent to begin with!...

...*take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents.* Let us miss the point, the master whose return has proven so disastrous for the third servant draws out the moral: *For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* At which point, the master—casting all subtlety to the wind—concludes: *As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Ouch!

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I can't imagine...I can't imagine anyone (including any Christian who was not utterly caught up in self-satisfaction) I cannot imagine anyone not reacting with a wee bit of discomfort to this intentionally discomforting parable. If you're not okay with this parable...that's a good thing! You shouldn't be okay with this parable! Like so many of Jesus' other parables—especially in Matthew's Gospel—the only way we can be okay with it, is by pretending that it has nothing to do with us. Once we acknowledge that we are implicated in the parable...once we acknowledge that we may ourselves bear an uncanny resemblance to the third servant...then and only then are we really hearing this parable, precisely in its ability to discomfort us.

And surely part of the discomfort has to do with the utter lack of compassion and the utter lack of graciousness on the part of the master. Remember: this parable—as is also true of the other two parables in Matthew 25—is a parable of the Kingdom. And while it is always a mistake to turn a parable into an allegory, the fact remains that the Master in this parable very much occupies the role within the parable that the Creator God occupies in the lengthy, multi-chaptered parable we call the Bible. Like the Creator, the Master is clearly in charge; like the Creator, the Master originates all the action; like the Creator, the Master hands out assignments to those who occupy the story; like the Creator, the Master is the one to whom those given an assignment are accountable; like the Creator, the Master remains hidden from view for much of the parable and—finally—like the Creator, the Master rewards both those who succeed with their assignment as well as those who fail. And what lavish rewards this Master has to offer those who succeed! And yes, what devastating rewards this Master has to offer those who fail. Then again...then again!

It may well be the case...it may well be the case that we go wrong in our encounter with this parable, the minute we think in terms of success and failure. Maybe that's the key mistake we tend to make when we hear the parable of the talents...when we hear the parable of the three servants. Let me explain...let me explain what I'm getting at here.

If we focus on questions of success and failure...in other words, if we focus on the fact that the first two servants succeeded with their programme for increasing their master's wealth coupled with the failure of the third servant to have an equal measure of success...if we focus on success and failure, we're locked into a way of hearing this parable that takes, for its focus, the final result of the respective investment programme followed by the three servants. But I think we need to back-up; I think we need to look behind the scenes, at what was going on in each of their psyches as they undertake to carry out the master's wishes. And while we don't know for sure—we can only surmise—what was going through the minds of servants one and two, we don't need to employ guesswork when it comes to that final servant.

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. I knew you were a harsh man. I knew you were a harsh man...and I was afraid.

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Preconceptions.....preconceptions. A sense in which the characters in this parable get the master they deserve...more accurately...get the master they imagine him to be. The first two servants imagine their master to be fundamentally gracious...and so they step out in faith...risk losing everything...

...you don't have to be a member of Occupy Wall Street to realize that markets are not always beneficent in their outcomes...

...risk losing everything, and discover that their master does indeed bless their risk-taking with praise and further increase to their responsibility. By contrast, the third servant...the third servant presumes his master to be hard and unrelenting...therefore chooses to play it safe...and in the process loses everything including the respect and affection of the master.

And you know: there is a part of me...a part of me that wishes there had been a fourth servant to this parable...a fourth servant who (like the first two servants) risked everything but who lost everything in the process of risk-taking. It would be fascinating to know whether that fourth servant—in Jesus' revised parable—would be praised for his risk-taking, or condemned for the failure of his risk to pay-off. Mind you, that version of the parable would have spelled things out for us, perhaps a little too neatly. That version of the parable would have resolved the tension...and Jesus, unlike Foster—wasn't generally all that big on resolving our tension. On the contrary, our Lord seems

to have had a positive appreciation of what it means for us, at least some of the time, to be on the edge...on the edge of our seats...on the edge of our consciousness, as we try to understand what it means to follow him...as we wrestle with what it means to call ourselves disciples of Christ.

Permit me, then...permit me, then: as I bring these remarks to a close...permit me (rather than resolving the tension) to define the tension inside of which we live as disciples...as followers of Christ. On the one hand, we follow in the footsteps of the Christ who (however else we define him) came to align himself utterly, thoroughly, radically with God's vision for humanity. We follow, in short, in the footsteps of a Christ whose call to us can, at times, appear to demand a super-human response from the likes of you and me. On the other hand, we follow in the footsteps of the Christ who, having issued that call to radical discipleship, leaps—leaps on our behalf—leaps into the fiery abyss of the unknown, trusting fully that God will indeed uphold him, which—of course—is precisely what takes place with the joyful discovery that death could *not* hold him.

And so we are called to a way of life, one in which we say, first and foremost, *no* to the possibility that seems to paralyze the third servant: a resolute no to the prospect that God is less than loving, less than gracious, less than compassionate. And we do so not as a way of ignoring Jesus' tough-minded parables...but as a way of hearing those parables in light of the way in which his very life became a parable...including...including...

...that defining moment: when he took bread and blessed and broke it and fed his friends: even those would soon abandon him. That defining moment when he lifted a cup and blessed and poured it out, offering it to them as a reminder that God desires nothing more than to fill us with life: life in abundance...the very life that alone makes it possible for us to step out courageously...

...nurturing our talents, however threadbare they might be...

...and offering them for the love of God...and for the life of the world.

May God grant us the confidence...and the deep trust...that alone can set us free for lives of true service, for lives of genuine love. In Jesus' name! Amen!!

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