



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, November 15, 2020

Scripture Passages: Judges 4:1-7 & Matthew 25:14-30

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few years ago a friend of mine lent me a book by Dorothy L. Sayers – she of the golden age of mystery writing – a contemporary of Agatha Christie. In my humble opinion she blows the spots off Mrs. Christie. Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot have nothing on Lord Peter Wimsey her most famous character.

A lesser known fact is that Ms. Sayers was also a deeply committed Anglican with a keen theological mind and the book my friend gave me was a theological text I hadn't somehow read. I have spent some considerable time with Ms. Sayers over the years and feel that my reading senses have been formed by her – I fancy myself a bit of an amateur sleuth. One of these days I will write an ecclesiastical mystery but don't worry I'll change the names to protect the innocent.

But a facility for sleuthing actually comes in handy when you're approaching scripture. Seriously. And particularly when you're approaching the parables. We need to approach them like a sleuth with a magnifying glass and a skeptical mind and look for the details in order to figure out what's going on – especially with our parable this morning because we have to rescue the parable of the talents from a simplistic interpretation.

This is a tough parable. Well, all parables are tough. There's never an easy way to go with them. Far from being the comfortable images of mustard seeds and sowers of seeds, the parables open us up to the unexpected, the shocking and the new, and they teach us to welcome them because in them we find God waiting for us. That's why Jesus tells them. Their meaning though is sometimes a little elusive or uncomfortable as in the case of our parable this morning.

So let's have a look at what usually happens with this one.

Usually we read this parable this way:

A man goes away. Leaves his money entrusted to three servants. The first two invest the money and make him loads of profit. They are rewarded with more responsibility and by entering their Master's joy. The third servant buries the money and returns it with no interest. The Master who, we are told is a harsh man berates the servant and throws him into the outer darkness. And then says that those who have much will be given more.

So, we usually say this is a story that mirrors the story about not hiding our lights under a barrel. Don't squander your gifts – your talents. Use them to bring profit to the Lord/the church. And we move swiftly past the difficulty of the Master being a harsh man and the issues of usury and the suspicion of ill gotten gain as well as the worry about the poor getting poorer. And even more literally, this parable is used on Stewardship Sunday as a foundational story to support the financial wellbeing of the church.

Now I'm sorry I'm going to have to ruin a good stewardship sermon today. Because I think we've got it all wrong. All wrong.

You see I think this parable is a wisdom parable. I'd even go so far to say that I think this parable is to be read in the complete opposite way that we traditionally read it.

Let's try this on for size:

First of all, I think it's clear that Matthew wants us to focus on the back half of the parable: on useless slave, the outer darkness, the wailing and gnashing of teeth. That's where the emphasis is. Like all good stories, or all good jokes unfold, it's usually the third character in the joke that has the punch line. You know, how it goes - did I tell you the one about the Baptist, the Presbyterian and the Anglican who walk into a church? You know the punchline is going to come from the Anglican – it always comes from the third guy. That sort of thing. So we're to focus on the third servant. That much is clear.

Well, the punch line of this parable seems to be that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. If this is a joke, it's not a very good one! Perhaps Jesus speaks in parables so that his followers will be required to ponder that question.

On the one hand, the parable of the talents has long encouraged the church's stewardship of whatever gifts God has given. By this reckoning, the servant who buries his gift is like a tree that doesn't bear good fruit. He deserves judgment. Those who increase their gifts are like the faithful servant who is at work when the Lord comes, who will be placed in charge of the Lord's possessions.

But I have to say that it all comes unravelled slightly when we start to ask questions about who is the slave owner supposed to be? God? Jesus? – with the reference to coming back, we might be tempted to go that way.

So, I really struggle with that reading. My sleuth's mind tells me it doesn't all add up. It doesn't chime with what I know of the Lord in other parts of scripture – and I'll bet it doesn't make much sense to you either.

This version tries to tell me that, God – the Master in the story is a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. But the detective in me says, that is the very opposite of the God of Israel who we know from other stories in scripture, brought God's people into a land flowing with milk and honey, drinking from cisterns they did not dig and reaping harvests that they did not plant.

It is totally unlike the God who tells farmers to harvest badly, leaving the edges of the wheat, leaving dropped sheaves behind, not stripping the vines or shaking the olive trees, so that those who have absolutely nothing to sow can reap anyway and be taken care of in a generous society.

And it's nothing like Jesus' other parable of the sower who goes out and throws seed extravagantly – almost stupidly - all over the place, knowing that whatever lands on the good soil will produce beyond one's wildest dream. This doesn't add up.

And when the third servant says that the Master is a harsh man who reaps where he doesn't sow and gathering where he had scattered no seed, the Master leaves that statement unchallenged. Given all that I'm thinking that this is not the God made known to us in Jesus.

And the supposed moral of the story is also a real problem: "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?"

That's weird because this moral directly contradicts the prophet Amos' warning in the Old Testament against those who add field to field and—instead of leaving behind the edges and dropped sheaves for the poor—sell the sweepings of the field. It's also contrary to the warnings Jesus gave us against greed not to mention his message of "good news to the poor."

And perhaps most convincingly this is so unlike the lived experience of the early church, who sold what they had and pooled all their resources so that everyone would have enough.

The case is really adding up here.

And I don't know about you but the clincher for me is the assumption that in God's economy the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Again, this kind of principle is not what we know God made known in Jesus.

So, I'm going to suggest a different reading. I can't take any credit for it – scholars have long been suspicious of the traditional reading. See if it adds up to you.

This is the great thing about scripture – we're supposed to struggle with it like this – supposed to ask questions and think and study. It's no good if it's not a challenge.

Viewed from a different perspective, the parable could be exposing the challenges of trying to be faithful in a world that's dominated by power and wealth. The rich man got his wealth at the expense of others—by “reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed.” The first two servants multiply his dishonesty.

But, the third servant, well this guy refuses to participate in this system of oppression, and for his pains in trying to be honest and fair, he's persecuted. I really think that the parable tries to offer an unvarnished analysis of the real world. What's more, Jesus' followers probably heard the echo of his earlier words about the cost of discipleship: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. . . . For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matt. 16:24–26). Now that all begins to make sense.

And more, Jesus tells this parable just a couple of days before his arrest and crucifixion. And those are events that prove the world's habit of punishing those who speak truth to power. Like the third servant in the story, Jesus will be condemned to suffering. Abandoned by most of his friends, he'll cry out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” Then he'll be buried in a tomb, just as the talent is buried deep in the ground.

But we know that this isn't the end of the story, even if it's the ending of that parable. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, and the day comes when the Messiah proclaims what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.

Parables are so challenging. They challenge the way we think about things. In a real way they challenge the status quo. They push out all conventional ways of thinking so that we can see and hear God's purposes in a fresh, even alternative way. We're able to glimpse something of God's ways and God's thinking – and of the kingdom – if only fleetingly.

So, it does actually make sense – this reading. Because if you look at where it is in the narrative, it's just when Jesus is coming very close to his sacrificial walk to the cross that it happens. He knows what is coming and he's preparing his followers for it.

And the fact that we just can't really make sense of it in terms of the other way we've tried to read it also satisfies this amateur detective that is the right way if the most uncomfortable way to read it.

Okay, what then is the point of the parable once we've figured out how to read it?

Well, it's not easy. If you've added up all the clues, I think you're beginning to suspect that there is not a particularly easy ending here.

The point of the parable is to tell us that the walk of faith in our world – a world that is driven by human systems, is difficult. Our faith requires us to think differently; to act differently: to work for God's justice and to be merciful as our heavenly father is merciful and care for the widow and the orphan; to act out of the knowledge that there is no Jew, no Greek, no male nor female – in Christ Jesus we are one. These are the differences that faith makes.

What this parable does is help us understand and expect the consequences of that difference.

And we haven't always wanted to see it – rather like wanting to see this parable as a benign if odd parable of stewardship. We have wanted to domesticate the Gospel and we have particularly wanted to domesticate Jesus. It's been easier that way. But it's also taken our vibrancy and energy too.

Just as an aside, our young people understand this. I am constantly inspired by their yearning – not so much for the beauty of holiness - but for the rigour of holiness. They embrace the other worldliness that we meet in the parables. And I think they're onto something there.

After all, if we have faith in, or are working our way toward faith in, Jesus, the fact is we are following the one who turns the priorities of this world on its head. The one who constantly, persistently – some would even say rebelliously - turns our eyes toward God's mercy and justice and peace and hope and love in the face of the ruthlessness, lawlessness, pandemic and hopelessness and hate of this world.

This is why it's so important to stay close to what we know of God in the Bible. To keep company with Jesus. The church is not meant to be a domesticated, comfortable, institution, but something that is a corrective to the ways of this world.

But are we? Lots to think about here.

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