11-15-26
Consecration Sunday
Matthew 25.14-30

When we set this date for Consecration Sunday, I looked to see what the texts assigned in the Lectionary for this week were, and as we just heard, the Gospel passage is the "parable of the talents." Which, at first glance, might seem like the ideal text to preach at the conclusion of a season focused on the stewardship of resources! I joined a Facebook group for PCUSA pastors a while back, and someone posted this on Thursday: "I feel like I want to start a support group for people preaching from Matthew this week." As I read their comments, I got the impression that several of the pastors were uncomfortable talking about money. Others though seemed excited about a sermon on today's text. One said they were going to preach about taking risks. Another said he would talk about how churches bury their resources rather than put them to work. Then wrote, "Sigh. Probably won't though." This *is* a popular parable for preachers wanting to talk about stewardship of resources – not just money, but time and talents. Indeed – the English word "talent" is derived from the Greek word used here for this enormous sum of money. A talent was about 15 *years* wages for a day laborer. The man in this parable is *extremely* wealthy, unlike Jesus' audience. This man has slaves, and not just slaves to do manual labor on his presumably large estates, but slaves educated enough that he can entrust his wealth to them. This is a man of extraordinary wealth. The kind of person Jesus has made very clear to his disciples *cannot* enter the kingdom of heaven. "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to squeeze his portfolio through the pearly gates." That's my paraphrase of what Jesus says back in chapter 19. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught the crowds that you cannot serve God and mammon, or, wealth. And as we heard last week, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we're supposed to be willing to deploy our resources in service of our neighbors in need. All of which leads me to ask questions about the traditional understanding of the parable of the talents.

Because we've been going off Lectionary occasionally recently, we've missed the steady progression of Matthew's account of Jesus' final teaching in Jerusalem during the week, at the end of which, he will be executed. He's been talking about the end of the age, and the coming of the son of humanity, and the judgment that he will bring. The disciples want to know what signs they should look for, and Jesus tells them things are going to get very bleak, very quickly. He exhorts them to be prepared to endure a great deal of suffering before the king returns in glory. "Keep alert!" is the watchword, as he proceeds to tell a series of parables about servants, bridesmaids, and now slaves. All awaiting the return of their master. He will conclude this series of parables with the parable of the sheep and the goats, which immediately follows this morning's text, and lays out the criteria for the judgment that is to come: whether we feed Jesus in the hungry person we meet; or offer water to the thirsty. Welcome the migrant. Clothe the naked. Take care of the sick. Visit those in prison.

As we've observed before, Jesus' parables about the kingdom of heaven can invite a negative as well as a positive comparison. He begins, "For it is as if a man, going on a

journey, summoned his slaves…". His audience will be invited to consider what this parable tells us about those slaves, but *also,* what it tells us about their master. First, they learn that he's extremely wealthy. Second, that he has slaves he trusts enough to invest his wealth "according to their ability." One gets five talents, one gets two, and the third gets one. When the master eventually returns, he requires an accounting. The first slave tells him he has doubled his master's money. The master responds, "'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." The second servant tells him the same thing, and receives the same response.

Then he comes to the third slave.

He begins by describing his master's character: "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter." Then he continues, "so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." And this time the master is nor impressed. He says, "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." Then comes the judgment: "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." At this point in a stewardship sermon, one might just conclude, "So be like the slaves who used their talents wisely, and not like the slave who buried his talent in the ground." That's certainly one way to read this text, and the one that seemed most likely for my peers in the Facebook group. But I wonder if Jesus's audience would have come to that conclusion? Or if they would have just shrugged their shoulders and thought, "Yup. That's pretty much the way life works."

Let's go back to the description the "worthless slave" gave of his master. "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter." For people in an agrarian society like first century Israel, this is a description of someone who benefits from the labor of people like them. Labor which does not earn *them* anything like the rewards the master receives. But worse than that, this is a man who's operating outside their economy. It's hard for us to hear this parable as Jesus' audience of peasant laborers would. Our economy is arguably based on consumer capitalism. An economy built on the belief that it's always possible to grow your economy. GDP can – and should – move up and to the right. But in first century Israel, they do not believe in the possibility of infinite growth. To them, all goods are already distributed: they inhabit a world of "limited goods."

Any increase in the wealth of one person automatically meant a loss for someone else, and given the sums involved here, the losses experienced were enormous. So, while we may be tempted to join the master in praising the slaves who doubled his wealth, Jesus' audience probably would not have viewed them so favorably. But the third slave? The one who didn't

even deposit his talent in the money market, to at least earn his master a 3.8% return on his investment? The one who instead buried the talent in the ground? Perhaps Jesus' audience would have – in fact – viewed him as the hero of the parable, for refusing to participate in the predatory system of his master. Perhaps. They certainly wouldn't be surprised to hear of the *judgment* the master passed on him, however: "As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Well, what does this have to do with us, twenty centuries removed from this story? Perhaps just to observe that the more things change, the more they stay the same. This week, I sat in a presentation about the performance of our investment portfolio. I noted that our holdings in fossil fuel companies and health insurance companies were showing returns of 20% plus over the last 12 months. Which is certainly *great* for our portfolio. But which begs the questions, *why* are those companies doing so well? Which was potentially answered when we later turned to our projected *expenses* for next year. For our health insurance premiums will increase by 13%; our utilities by around 10%. Much like – I imagine – is true for *all* of us in our personal and family budgets. Maybe those two realities offset each other in the long run. But what if you're outside this system? What if you're not invested in the market? What if you're just experiencing increased costs, with no additional benefits, or, as is often the case, *reduced* benefits? You may find yourself saying, with the third slave, "You reap where you do not sow; "you gather where you did not scatter." "You're taking more and more, and giving less and less." The fact that the first two slaves double their master's money suggests they're involved in usury: lending at rates that disproportionately enrich the lender. There are, after all, no mutual funds for them to invest in. Just people who may need a short term loan to cope with an unexpected expense. Jesus has, in fact, told his disciples to lend *without* expectation of return, let alone with the expectation that you'll *double* your money. Even the master seems to acknowledge that's what's going on, by saying to the third slave, "You should have at least invested my money with the bankers. Not as profitable as usury, but it's something at least. So, take this worthless slave, throw him into the darkness outside." Because when you challenge the system that works for only a few, that's where you'll end up.

Just as Jesus himself will, a few days from now.

When the Temple elite will collaborate with the might of empire. For daring to challenge the status quo, the way things are. A system that works very well for people like them, but not for those who hang on Jesus' every word this week. The powerful will crucify Jesus, and darkness will indeed fall over the whole land, while those who loved him, will weep, and gnash their teeth.

This *is* a parable, which means there are multiple possible levels of meaning. Multiple ways of understanding what Jesus is teaching. So yes, it's possible to talk about not burying your talent, but offering all you have to God. That's certainly in line with the whole narrative of scripture, where we are often reminded that, "the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it." But in this moment, perhaps the parable is inviting *us* to ask questions of *where* we're investing

our resources, and who is paying the price for whatever gains we may make. That's an entirely different conversation than the one that involves an exhortation not to bury our talents. Or one that talks about taking risks for the kin-dom. The thought of *that* kind of conversation instead of the more traditional reading of this parable probably prompted that pastor to post about needing a support group after preaching!

We *are* invited to invest our resources in the work of the kin-dom of God, as it comes on earth as it is in heaven. Those of us who have made this congregation our church home will do so this morning, as we come to the Table, and make our financial pledge to the work that God is doing among us and beyond us. But let us *also* pledge to continue to offer tangible support to those for whom our economic system does *not* work. And pledge to work, together, towards a more just and equitable economy.

Amen, and amen.