Message: ""The Trouble with Parables" – 11-15-26

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30

14"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15to one
he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.
16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more
talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18But the one who had
received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19After a long
time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20Then 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.' 21His 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.' 22And 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.' 23His 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.' 24Then 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;
25so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26But 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? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I
would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to the one
with the ten talents. 29For 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. 30As for this worthless slave, throw
him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

I start this morning with a confession – that this is one of my least favorite parables Jesus ever shared. I think it is a yucky parable (is it OK for a pastor use the term "yucky?"). It has to do with things that make me very uncomfortable and sends mixed messages all over the place. A master with slaves is going out of the country; he calls three of his most trustworthy slaves to him and gives them ridiculous amounts of money – a talent is 15 year's wages, which in today's terms considering minimum wage, that would be $10.85 x 40 hrs. x 50 weeks x 15 years = $325,500. So he gives one slave $1,627,500, the next slave $651,000, and the last slave $325,500 (remember, I once was an engineer and I still love math!). The first two invest wisely and increase the master's wealth; the last one buries his $325,500 in the ground because he feared his master, saying of him (and I quote), "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed;" in other words, his master was a crook, or at least an exploiter of others. The first two slaves were rewarded for their shrewd investments; the last one was chastised for not improving his corrupt master's portfolio. Jesus ends the parable this way: "29For 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. 30As for this worthless slave,

throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

So we have a corrupt master who owns slaves; he gives them dirty money to invest; we have the slaves investing in schemes likely to be as corrupt back then as they are today; we have the two slaves who played the game well and one who refused to join in the corruption; we have those who were successful rewarded by being given much more wealth, and the one who played it safe robbed of his wealth and banished to outer darkness. So, corruption is a virtue, having others do one's dirty work is praised, obscene wealth provides acceptable opportunity, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer?

Anyone else have any trouble with this parable? Or am I just whistling dixie?

I really do have a problem with this parable, but I know how to get over it just like I know how to get over most of the problematic, troubling, counter-intuitive messaging Jesus is known for. The key is actually to not try to get over it at all, in terms of identifying the one solid, clear, undeniable truth Jesus is trying to get across; the key is to continue working through the parable without denying its deep challenge and twisted logic in order to continue learning about the strange gift of God's mysterious and incomprehensible grace. In other words, parables were never meant to reflect all of God's truth in any particular area; parables are invitations to enter into the uncertainty represented by God.

I wonder if this thought helps you as it does me, when I consider that the parable before us today is not really about shrewdness of financial investment strategies or using our talents or resources or gifts or whatever we possess to increase and enhance the kingdom of God on earth; it's more about willingness to trust in a God we can never pin down completely. For that is who God is – not someone or something we will ever know fully, not someone or something who is confined by our rules of common sense and rationality, not even someone or something confined to our sense of morality or ethics. That's scary stuff, to trust in someone or something you really don't know except through imperfect witnesses throughout the ages and through confusing multiplicities of representation. That's scary stuff, that is, until you activate that trust by beginning to take your own personal steps towards the mystery. It's the same kind of thing that happens when any potentially meaningful relationship begins –

you probably know very little about the other person, but something has piqued your interest, something says there might be commonalities to discover, there might be differences that could teach you something – BUT YOU WILL NEVER KNOW UNTIL YOU RISK STEPPING INTO THE UNKNOWN. You cannot discover the gift of another life without trusting that there is a gift there to be shared, somewhere within the uncertainty of the unknown. Likewise, you cannot know God at all if you do not move into uncertainty.

But what does giving ourselves to the uncertainty of God mean? What does it look like to live into the riskiness of following Jesus? Where will he lead us? How shall we know if we are making the right kind of progress?

This is where I feel I begin to understand why Jesus would choose to share this parable – and I begin to come down off my high horse of proclaiming it a bad parable. For there is no such thing; at least, there is no bad parable that Jesus shares if we understand parables in a certain way – AS CATALYSTS FOR DEEPER THINKING. DEEPER THINKING ABOUT LIFE; DEEPER THINKING ABOUT FAITH; DEEPER THINKING ABOUT TRUTH, AND ABOUT LOVE, AND ABOUT GRACE, AND ABOUT ALL THE THINGS GOD REPRESENTS. This is a key part of what it means to have faith – that our trust in God helps us move into the uncertainty of God and of the world, training our efforts on discovering what God has to share that the world needs to know.

I was more than pleased to receive help on this sermon topic from none other than the President of my graduate school who gave the Opening Assembly Address for Yale's commencement of the 2026-2027 academic year on August 24th of this year. President Maurie McInnis, who is Yale's first woman president in its 326 year history, spoke on the need to enter into uncertainty's domain, for that is what defines the future – uncertainty. These are her words: "the most important endeavors tend to be undefined, without a fixed process or assured conclusion; life …is a journey without a predetermined ending filled with questions that can't be answered except by living through them; [we would do well to] revel in our uncertainty, for it is a prerequisite to wonder – so long as we don't chase it away too soon." Towards the end of her address, she said this: "Uncertainty isn't something to fear. Uncertainty is something to welcome. Uncertainty propels the search for knowledge, because there would be no learning without uncertainty."

She was addressing thousands of entering freshmen and graduate students, but she may as well have been addressing any community of faith, for her words strike at the center of what faith means – trust before knowledge. Trust comes before knowledge in that one must trust that there is knowledge worth knowing before one will search for that knowledge. In other words, uncertainty must be stepped into in order to make any discovery of certainty.

This brings us to another point made in our scripture passage, and it is the point Jesus is making directly when the parable he uses points to the one slave whose fear froze him out of action. Maybe this is another reason I am gaining an appreciation for this parable after all, for it is clear that the slave was moved to inaction due to his projected fear over the master's reaction if he failed to invest wisely or even lost what he was entrusted with. Fear kept him from trying – and it is at least possible that this was his greatest offense. You can sense his self-doubt and uncertainty regarding his ability to not lose his master's investment, let alone increase it through wise investing. You can sense he doesn't believe in his master's trust in him, as related by the master giving to each slave according to their ability. Was this not a case of self-defeatism? About not trying because he didn't trust the master's trust in him?

I can relate very well to that slave's mind-frame, for I once was a champion of self-defeatism, as I believe many of you might be as well. When I say I once was a champion at self-defeatism, what I mean is that I was overqualified in self-criticism; I had an over-abundance of self-doubt; and I didn't ever need any convincing to put myself down. Please notice all of those characterizations are in the past tense, for I learned something extremely precious about how to let go of my own self-defeating behavior – trusting something other than myself. Trusting something greater than myself. Trusting God more than I trusted myself.

It made many things harder, but everything better, to trust that God was with me, and, in my trusting, discover so very many times that God was indeed guiding me, sustaining me, and watching over me when I needed it the most. It made me realize that authentic faith begins in the realization that we are not sufficient for the challenges of existence on our own; faith invites us to trade our trust in ourselves with the trust God has placed in us, to understand that God has confidence enough in each one of us to join us in the risky business of living. It means letting God lead; it means stepping into the uncertainty; and it means discovering the God who will always be there in that uncertainty.

So how about it? Does anyone here struggle with self-doubt? I hope you do, for that's the only way to let God in; doubting that we ourselves have all that we need to live and hope and love and grow is the natural motivator for faith; having no doubts about such things is nothing short of delusional. Do you have self-doubts? Good – may those doubts open you to the confidence God has in you nonetheless. For it is only by trusting in God's confidence in us that we will ever exceed our self-doubts – and discover for ourselves that God's confidence in us is justified.