

Judges 4: 1-8
I Thessalonians 5: 1-11
Matthew 25: 14-39

Trust
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I am sure that many people do not realize how much of our language is informed by, or directly derived from, the Bible. So much so that, when I hear a familiar phrase like, “neither a borrower nor a lender be,” my first thought is: “Is that from the Bible or Shakespeare?” (It’s from Shakespeare’s Hamlet – though it might actually pertain to our Gospel reading today as well.) The word “talent,” though, is a Bible word. In the Parable of the Talents, which we just heard, a talent was a sum of money, a lot of money. Today it would be worth between 6 and 7 hundred thousand dollars, or many years of income for a poor laborer. In modern use, though, it means a natural aptitude or skill. And so it is tossed around in a very broad sense, especially in the entertainment industry. There are TV shows like “America’s Got Talent,” where contestants are promised a lucrative return on their investment of their performing skills. The web site asks, in large bold type, “Could you be the next million dollar act?!” Invest your talent, display your skills, smile at the judges, and the possibilities are limitless.

Many of you have heard the Parable of the Talents before (often during stewardship season, when we are encouraged to invest in the church); to some of you it may be new. But, in either case, I want to remind you that parables are tricky, slippery things that defy a simple or complete explanation. So – spoiler alert - this parable is not about money. I don’t even think that it is about our aptitudes and skills. I think that is it about relationships...as are most of Jesus’ teachings, come to think of it. Lately we have been reading a lot of parables from the Gospel of Matthew (Susan White got to wrestle with the 5 Wise and the 5 Nitwit bridesmaids last week) and some of them just seem to run contrary to all that we believe about a loving and merciful God. And yet, for centuries, preachers have been using them to offer word pictures of God that do not encourage or build us up.

Often, the preachers’ message is this: the man going on a journey is God, or perhaps Jesus as God’s emissary. The slaves are Christians, entrusted with valuable property or talents. The first two slaves are shrewd, hard-working, loyal risk-takers, and invest their talents well. When their master (God) returns, they are praised as good and trustworthy. They are rewarded with more responsibility and “the joy of their master.” They are heroes. The third slave is fearful, cautious, and wrong. He does not invest his wealth, but hides it. The master condemns him as wicked and lazy for not investing. Not only is the wealth taken away, but he is driven out, into the outer darkness. So we should not be like that worthless slave, because God may judge us in the same way. This is an allegorical reading, where each character has an assigned part to play in the drama, and we recognize each one.

It is easy to make allegories of stories from the past, when the culture was so different that it all reads like fiction, or fairy tales anyway. But listen to the way investing actually worked in the first century: the 1%, the wealthiest people, were the only ones who had the capital to invest. It was common for wealthy lenders to assign the dirty tasks of negotiating the loans, collecting on them, and then repossessing the properties, to their servants or slaves. It was considered

dishonorable for nobility to expand their wealth, and since servants were a class without honor, they were given the job. That also gave the lenders the ability to deny any knowledge of wrong-doing if some unpleasant situation became public. There were two main ways to manage large sums of money. One was through the Temple treasury, which was both a currency exchange and a place to store your wealth. It was a good holding place for riches because you could avoid paying Roman taxes on it, and you could also avoid the Jewish debt-cancelation laws that rolled around every seven years. The other way to manage or invest was offering mortgage loans or bridge loans to small farmer families struggling to stay afloat in the declining first century Palestinian economy. The motivation for loaning money, then, was primarily for the purpose of getting borrowers in over their heads and then being foreclosed on and losing their property. They would then either become tenants on what had been their own property, homeless, or join the ranks of the growing number of bandits or revolutionary militias. Jesus lived in a chaotic, dangerous time – a lot like our own.

What if this is not an allegory of the pathway to heaven, but a description of how the world works. Two slaves double their master's investment. Sounds pretty good. Unless. Unless you were observing Jewish laws about ethical treatment of your neighbors. The 25th chapter of Leviticus specifically warns against usury, saying, “do not lend your money at interest taken in advance, or otherwise make a profit from” people in need. The prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 5:8) condemned those who “joined house to house and field to field” in greedy real estate dealings. In the time of Jesus, doubling your money was not a smart move: it was considered grasping and predatory. Someone trying to accumulate that kind of wealth was seen as breaking up the stability of society, especially when small landowners could be leveraged off their land in a hard season. Those who wanted to make large sums of cash would use lucrative trading, fraud, tax collecting and lending money at high interest. These things were seen as the greedy practices of the super-rich, responsible for a destructive cycle of indebtedness and poverty. Some Bible scholars think that all this is implied by the first two slaves' success.

What if this is not an allegory? What if that third “unproductive” slave - doing the only thing that would preserve the master's property without taking advantage of his neighbors – what if he were the hero? There he stands, bravely calling the master what he is: “a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed” even though it means being cast out where the poor “weep and gnash their teeth.” This slave is whistle-blower, naming the elites and their system for what they are. Perhaps Jesus was simply saying that if you stand up and denounce an immoral, evil, system, you may have to pay for it.

What struck me in this year's reading of this familiar parable was the number of times we read variations on the word “trust:” entrusting talents, trustworthy slaves. And the passage from the first letter to the Thessalonians also speaks of trusting God amid all the uncertainties. Here is the Good News – or the Bad News, for some – investing all of our trust in God, re-aligns our relationship to the world. We no longer trust in amassing large sums of money – not if it means trampling those less fortunate than ourselves. We no longer trust those who market fear and anxiety – not if it means misdirected energy keeping us from loving our neighbors, near and far. Our trust in God re-aligns our relationships, pulling us out of isolation so that subsides, our hands are no longer clenched in apprehension, but instead open to love the neighbor in need. That is what trusting God, and encouraging each other in that trust, can do. Some of us have a talent for this kind trust, and we would do well to share it with other – that is the truest form of spiritual investment.

The writer and mystic Suzanne Guthrie writes:

“This parable scares me more than all the other parables and Biblical admonitions put together. It makes me curl into a ball on the couch with a blanket over my head.

I do not believe in the Last Judgment – at least not in the way people often think Christians believe in one – with a humorless white haired judge on a throne separating the sheep from the goats, that is, one denomination against another, or one religion against another, or whatever group needs a group against which to elevate themselves.

But I don't need to believe in a hateful judgment. I am my own merciless judge.

I see myself as the slave in the parable of the talents, who buried what was given him, and, summoned before the master, admits his failure to risk investing it as the other slaves had done with so much success. I look at my life and send myself to the place of wailing and gnashing of teeth. Or, at least to the couch.

The only salve for this trap of doomed perfectionism, misplaced ambition, and self-hatred are other scriptures. The parable of the lost sheep is helpful. ..I take comfort in Dismas, the thief on the cross next to Jesus who said, ‘Remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ All I can hope is that once or twice I did something kind and forgot about it. But the main point is that I'm not the judge of that.”

Suzanne Guthrie is not the judge of that. She, and we, turn that role over to God, who is so much more worthy of our trust, so much more merciful than we are, even with, or especially with, ourselves.

Both the parable and the letter from Paul speak to people who are in an “in-between time.” They are supposed to be getting ready, but they have no time-table. We still live in an in-between time. We have different ways of preparing for our futures, individual and corporate. One thing is clear: it is important in this in-between period to consider how we treat each other. We can imagine this as how we invest money, or how we refuse to invest money in ways that will hurt others. We can think of treating our neighbors well as we fulfill our mission through the best use of our talents. We can think of putting on the peaceful armor of God, which is faith and hope and love. We can prepare through encouragement of one another, the holy affirmation of each child of God. We can be thoughtful about when and why and how we trust, because that defines who and whose we are. We can be thoughtful, and awake, and sober, and supportive, because that is what trusting God looks like. Those are the talents worth investing, and then sharing, within this congregation and with the entire world. Amen.