

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus taught about a landlord who went on a journey. He summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then 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." His 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." And 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." His 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."

Then 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But 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? 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. 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 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."

The question in today's Gospel is: "What prompted the terror of the third servant?" He was not just nervous, or even afraid, he was terrified of the landowner. Not only doesn't he go out and invest the money entrusted to him, he doesn't even put it in the bank to draw interest. Instead, because of his fear, he buries it in the ground.

What's curious about this parable is the servant's assessment of his boss. He said, "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." In this parable, the landowner symbolizes God and the third servant had a very poor image of him, i.e., a harsh man taking what doesn't belong to him, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter.

Consider these points:

1) Neither of the other two servants felt such fear, even though they were entrusted with significantly more and so had more to lose.

2) The landowner gives them considerable sums to invest and then only comes back "after a long time", which shows the Master had a great amount of trust in the three servants.

3) The landowner rejoices in the success of the first two servants – "Well done! Enter into the joy of your master!"

4) Notice the Master responds to the third servant with a question: "You knew, didn't you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?" Just because the third servant thought that the master "Reaped where he did not sow, and gathered where he did not scatter", doesn't mean that that was the true nature of the master. Perhaps the master is angry because the third servant did not have the proper understanding of the master's character.

Perhaps the third servant's fearful actions and tragic fate are the result of a distorted image of the landowner. Notice that the land owner never said he was harsh and reaped where he did not sow and gathered where he did not scatter. Rather, he indicated that that was the belief of the third servant about the master. In other words, the landowner revealed the distorted image the third servant had of him.

More often than not, this parable has been read either as a warning against laziness in light of the landowner's eventual return, or as an exhortation to be actively preparing for the day of reckoning when all accounts will be settled at the end of time. But I think instead that this is a warning about how we picture God, how we imagine the character of God and God's temperament toward us.

The third servant's image of God is incorrect and that is what gets him into trouble. It is hard to trust a harsh God who reaps what he did not sow. His image of God is full of fear, rather than love and compassion, and that is why he buried the money.

What this Gospel shows us is that how we image God determines how we conduct our lives. The point is that our impression of God affects us and shapes our actions in our day-to-day lives.

Perhaps Matthew is warning us that, when it comes to God, what you see is what you get.

If we imagine God primarily as stern, angry, and given to dispensing a terrifying and harsh justice, we will look at life through that distorted lens and bring upon ourselves anger, terror and judgment.

But if we view God primarily in terms of grace and see God as one who empowers and entrusts and frees us, then we will be surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us, just as the first two servants did. When we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives and to share it with others.

For those who strive to be followers of Jesus, our image of God should be shaped by the sacrificial love of Jesus, as well as his teachings, and the reality that his resurrection defeated death. The God we see in Jesus is not "a harsh God, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter."

Rather, in this parable, God is symbolized in the landowner as giving more than is expected or deserved.

This parable invites us to be careful of our understanding and image of God. Are they images of hell-fire and damnation? Or, are they images formed by what we see on the pages of the Gospels. Whatever they are – what we see is what we will get.

For the followers of Jesus, God is a God of love, one who entrusts us with profound gifts and riches, eager for us to make the most of them, and inviting us always to enter the joy of our Lord. This understanding of God is what we will celebrate and offer to others.

In a couple of Sundays it will be Advent where we see God humbling himself and becoming a vulnerable and tender baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and resting in a manger. One of Matthew's main metaphors and names for Christ is Emmanuel, "God with us". Christ came in the flesh and promised to always be with us and for us. That's the image of God we need to hang onto.

This year is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. What started it all was Martin Luther's image of God changing from fear and damnation to love and mercy. Luther's new understanding of God made all the difference.

He taught that each of us are important and have gifts to share, no matter how insignificant they may seem to be.

Sir Michael Costa, the celebrated 19th century conductor from England, was holding a rehearsal. As the mighty chorus rang out, accompanied by scores of instruments, the piccolo player who had a little pint-sized flute thought that his contribution would not be missed amid so much music, so he stopped playing. Suddenly, the conductor stopped and cried out, "Where is the piccolo?"

The sound of that one small instrument was necessary to the harmony, and the Master Conductor missed it when it dropped out. The point is that to the Conductor, there are no insignificant instruments in an orchestra. Sometimes the smallest and seemingly least important can make the greatest contribution.

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