

We are getting close to Advent. This is actually the last week of what we refer to as ordinary time or the green season. Which is why for a few weeks we have been in a section of Matthew's gospel known as the little apocalypse, full of parables about the Kingdom of God, and this week is no exception. And like all the parables, the trick is to wonder about the story and characters in their own context and be careful not to layer over them with our own ideas. Practically impossible, but let's give it a shot, mainly by looking at the characters.

Let's start with the master. He is a wealthy land owner with slaves, and decides to give them money before going away. He returns after a long time. Now the passage says that he gives one slave 5,000 talents, the next 2,000, and the last, 1,000. We believe a talent is approximately 75 pounds of gold which would roughly equal \$1.5 million today. So even the last slave is entrusted with over a million dollars. With all this information we can deduce certain qualities possessed by the lord. He is incredibly generous: that's quite a lot of money and there are no strings attached. He is also incredibly trusting: the talents are given, then he goes away on a long trip.

Now we might wonder about the qualities of the slaves. None turns down the generosity of the master. Two of them use it immediately so that they double the money. These two do not attempt to keep the increase. When the characters give away the gifts, the gifts grow and then, in gratitude, they are happy to return the growth – there is no hoarding by the first two; the initial gift – the principle if you will, is treated only as a gift to be shared and grown, not as a possession. But there is also the last slave. Before we turn to him, let's return to the master.

When the two who double the money give over the proceeds, there is an invitation to enter into the joy of the master. This presupposes the master's disposition is joyful: enter into the joy... So we see the last slave has focused on the fear of rumors of a vindictive master whereas the other two focus on the gifts and the joy. The third servant lives in fear of God and operates on fear and is therefore only able to return what was originally given. Which brings us round to what this might all mean for us...

A clear line seems to be drawn in the parable between operating on fear and operating on faith. The faithful are rewarded. But the third operates on fear and loses out. Now, we can think of the master as harsh for casting him out but we have to appreciate the limitations of the narrative. It's a story – an analogy. If we are considering how the Kingdom of God operates, it seems the third slave has cast himself out. He was given good things freely, out of generosity. It seems he has chosen to operate on fear instead of faith and loses out on the joy. So we might consider: How many of us operate on fear – fear of the world or God? And what are the consequences for our lives and this world when we operate on fear rather than faith? And of course, what are the benefits of operating on faith instead of fear? If we want to go straight at it, let's go after a topic that really gets to the point and that is being used in the parable: money...

I have heard some say lately that billionaires should not exist. I agree with this sentiment as one who prayerfully studies the gospel. Like today's reading, we see over and over again that we are encouraged to use money in a holy manner, remembering that all things come from God and of God's own have we given in return. To accumulate wealth is to live in fear, not in generosity and

faith. What are the consequences? Sadly, we see this same thing happening in churches. Rather than living into our call as disciples of Christ to surrender ourselves to God, we timidly give portions of ourselves, never fully trusting in God's love and kindness. Of course I am guilty of this at least as much as anyone else. Like billionaires and the one slave who hid his money, we give sparingly instead of generously because we feel we need to hold onto our money. Instead of imitating the master in the parable and living generously we so often hold onto what was never really ours. Is this fear or faith?

Now, being wise with finances is actually a biblical principle. God doesn't want us to be foolish. But to use all that we have to God's glory is not foolish. It actually demonstrates a deeper wisdom. In referring to tithing, giving 10% of our income to God, John H. Macnaughton, in More Blessed to Give, says this: *Tithing is seldom mentioned in the New Testament because, in Jesus' mind, it was simply assumed as normal and expected. It was so obvious a standard that it was beyond discussion. In effect what Jesus says is this: Tithe? Of course we tithe! We don't need to discuss it. But having done it, don't think you have done it all. Tithing is only the beginning. Do it! Now let's get on to the weightier stuff – living your life in justice, mercy, and faith.* In other words, Jesus has a standard beyond what the law has stated. We see this earlier in Matthew's gospel in the Sermon on the Mount where he says if your hand causes you to sin cut it off and if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; love our enemies. Christians have agreed to live by quite a standard. Even in the way we manage our finances. This is a courageous way to live. It is a faithful way to live. And it leads to a world full of mercy and justice.

In The Holy Use of Money, Jesuit priest Father John C. Haughey says: *Jesus can be found in and would preside over all human concerns, for He is Lord. Our concerns concern him. In him we learn to handle them. Through believers he begins to subject them and the social systems to which they are linked to himself. Through the Spirit we learn to name these concerns in terms of him. They begin to lose their self-assertiveness, their autonomy, their potential for making exaggerated claims on our attention and diffusing our loyalty.* Next week we will celebrate Christ the King. We will wonder very specifically about where our loyalties truly lie. In the way we handle our personal finances and allow our economy to be structured are we making Christ the king? In the parable, the slave with the least who is thrown into the outer darkness, who really has thrown himself into the abyss, has not made Christ the king; he has allowed himself to be a slave of the human economy instead of God's economy. But the ones who enter into the joy, have courageously lived by faith, imitating the master; they have been generous, imitating the master.

It is no small thing to surrender oneself to the God who has lovingly created us into being. It seems like it makes no sense, and really it doesn't. But the spiritual journey can be summed up in just this. We spend our entire lives trying to get out of our own way in order to fully experience the love of God, in order to experience of entering into the joy of generous God. Perhaps it is time to take that leap of faith and move past whatever is holding us back. Perhaps today is the day we consider what is necessary to create a world of mercy and justice. Perhaps today is the day we take that leap of faith and enter into the joy of God's Kingdom.