

Provoked by the Parables at Brentwood Presbyterian

The Three Servants

August 14, 2011

Psalm 67 and Matthew 25:14-30
(Hymns – 34, 39, 663, 626)

This is a story about fear, faith, and the face of God.

It comes late in Matthew's Gospel,
in the midst of a series of parables
dealing with ethics and eschatology.
That big word – *eschatology* – simply means
the final coming of the kingdom of heaven,
the final achievement of God's purposes
revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ.

What Matthew is focused on in this section of his Gospel
is how the Christian community lives (ethics)
in the time between the resurrection and the return of Jesus.
The dominant themes in these stories
are vigilance and responsible action.

To watch for the final coming of the kingdom of heaven
is to engage in active service,
to live as if the kingdom is already here,
which is it is.
The realization of God's kingdom of *shalom*,
of peace and well-being for the whole of creation,
is a reality in our midst.
It is *the* reality in which we faithfully flourish.
It's final full realization has not yet arrived,
but it's influence and benefits are embraced and enjoyed
as the body of Christ – the church – does its work and witness in the world.

The parable of the three servants speaks to that work and witness.

The key actor in this story is the man who departs.
Prior to leaving on his journey,
he entrusts property to three servants.
One servant gets 5,000 gold coins, another 2,000, and another 1,000.

This is another example of how Matthew uses great extravagance
to make his points.

These are ridiculously large amounts of money.

The value of one talent/gold coin
is estimated to be 6,000 days or 20 years of wages,
and these servants get thousands of them.

Matthew's point, clearly, is that these are serious responsibilities.

Two servants work with what's entrusted to them,
produce admirable results,
and are highly praised by the returning owner.

The third servant hides the treasure away,
buries what was entrusted to him in the ground,
gives the owner back simply what he was given,
and is harshly condemned.

One thing struck me in particular this week
while studying this parable yet again.

It was the third servant's attitude toward the owner.
He is frightfully afraid.

His perspective is one of overwhelming fear.

He sees the owner as a harsh master,
making tough demands and expecting impossible things.

His fear of disapproval is a self-fulfilling prophesy.

His fear leads to inaction and his inaction leads to condemnation.

Try as he might to project the responsibility onto the owner,
it really remains with him.

It is his failure to use what is entrusted to him well
that leads to the darkness and anguish.

The owner is simply describing what the servant has brought upon himself.

I think this has to do with our attitude toward God,
with our perspective on who God really is.

This parable comes after Jesus' condemnation
of the teachings of scribes and Pharisees
who often pictured God as a demanding law-giver who must be obeyed.

This is a harsh, demanding, unforgiving God
whose agents – the scribes and the Pharisees – were always right.

Their teachings were the only way to understand the Law rightly.

Any challenges or criticisms were harshly rejected, often leading to crucifixion.

It was this kind of rigid, narrow, self-righteous religiosity
that Jesus, standing in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets,
challenged so powerfully.

No such 'fear of God' was found in the first two servants.
They trusted the good will and intentions of the owner.
They welcomed the responsibilities entrusted to them by the owner.
They had developed the confidence and the courage
to use these resources in the owner's service.
They took risks, tried experiments, worked diligently
to enhance the benefits derived from the resources entrusted to them.
Their attitude towards the owner was positive and trusting.
Their active faith gained the praise of the owner.

This perspective on the parable
raises for us the question of our image of God,
the face we see when we think of God.
Who do we think God is?
What is God like?
Is our God the stern judge who demands conformity to the Law
and rejects us if we don't succeed?
Or is our God the loving parent and partner who encourages passionate effort
and offers appreciative praise for the results?

If we truly see our God embodied in the work and witness of Jesus Christ,
then the image of loving parent partner is surely the truer one for Christians.
While we wait for the final coming of the kingdom of heaven,
we live as if heaven is with us.
We use the gifts entrusted to us to bless God's creation.
Those gifts may be money,
but more likely they are talents for doing things for others,
talents for being in the world with compassion and kindness.
And if money is among your gifts,
then using it with compassion and kindness is what pleases God.

As hymn #663, which we will sing later this morning, put it:

*Skills and time are ours for pressing towards the goals of Christ, your Son:
all at peace in health and freedom, races joined, the church made one.
Now direct our daily labour, lest we strive for self alone;
born with talents, make us servants fit to answer at your throne.*

Our God *is* demanding in his love for us,
demanding that we practice in gratitude
the gracious love we have received from him in Jesus Christ.