
FLYING

MATTHEW 25:14-30

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2020 BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

Therapist Eileen Goldman tells a story about a little girl on an airplane. Goldman says, “[The girl] was about four years old and [on] her very first flight. And as the plane was airborne, she turned to the woman next to her and said, ‘When do we get smaller?’ That had been her experience at airports watching airplanes take off. They do get smaller.” Goldman tells this story on an episode of the popular NPR show “This American Life.” The particular episode focuses on “kid logic.” In the introduction to the show, Ira Glass, the show’s host, says, “There’s a certain kind of story that kids tell... where they look at something going on around them, observe it carefully, think about it logically, how one thing connects to the next thing to the next, and then come to conclusions that are completely incorrect.”¹ Like children, we adults are prone to assess situations and come to conclusions that from one perspective make sense yet are ultimately missing the point. They’re not wrong per se; they’re just not the fullest conclusion.

Our Gospel lesson today lends itself to this kind of thinking. We make conclusions about God, God’s kingdom, and future judgment that from one perspective are accurate—in fact, the plane is getting smaller in the view from the ground—but miss the primary point to the detriment of the good message being proclaimed—we are flying! So as we listen again to Jesus’s teaching, we do so longing for the Spirit to give us ears to hear a fresh word for us today.

Jesus is with his disciples near the end of his earthly ministry, and he tells them another parable—a story intended to shed light on God’s already-but-not-yet kingdom. You’ll remember that Jesus has just told a parable about bridesmaids. Some of the bridesmaids have oil for their lamps and are ready when they wake up in the middle of the night. Some of them don’t and are not prepared for the groom’s return. So those who are listening to Jesus have “being prepared for a return” on their mind.

Then Jesus tells them another story. This one is about a man who went on a journey. Before he left, he entrusted his servants with his wealth. He didn’t just give them a little. He gave them tons—an abundant amount. One he gave about 140 years’ worth of wages. Another he gave about 60 years’ worth and still a third about 30 years’ worth. It’s an absurd amount of wealth the master had and an unbelievable amount of trust he put in those he left behind. Jesus says that the master was gone for a long time, perhaps long enough the servants were starting to wonder when he would return. We learn that two of those who received the master’s wealth went out and immediately put it to work. They used the wealth for trade, and it multiplied. Putting what belonged to the master to work within the larger society meant growth, increase, multiplication. The third servant took a different approach. It’s hard to blame him. He went the safe route. If he buried the wealth and essentially kept it to himself, it would be protected, secure, and unlikely to be lost through bad trades or poor investment or involvement with the wrong people.

I wonder if the disciples who were listening to Jesus automatically assumed that the third servant made a poor choice. Perhaps the third servant seemed prudent to them. After all, the master’s resources were precious—nothing to be fooled around with or lost along the way. I wonder if the disciples were prepared for what would happen when the master returned. Upon returning, the master had his servants give an accounting of their activity while he was away. This was surely to be expected. The first and second shared that they had increased what they had been given. Obviously, the master was pleased, so he welcomed them into the joy of his home, promising they would have future opportunities given to them. The third came forward and shared his approach. He said his decision was based on his judgment of the master. He knew the master would come back and expect an accounting, and frankly, he was afraid. Like a kid who uses faulty logic to conclude that people who fly shrink as they move into the sky, the servant seems to have used faulty reasoning to conclude that because he would be held accountable for

¹ <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/605/transcript>

his actions his master must be harsh, demanding, and even unjust in his expectations—reaping where he did not sow. But ultimately his misjudgment of the master meant he mismanaged what was put in his care. His fear drove him to insecurity and self-protective inaction. And the result was devastating. The master pronounced judgment on the servant's misjudgment and inaction. "You knew, did you?" The servant's knowing was a mistaken knowing, a wrong judgment, a false conclusion. And this resulted in him being on the outside, where the light, joy, and community of the master's house was replaced by darkness, bitter weeping, and the agony of missing out on the truest community.

There is a fair bit about this parable that can cause us to get hung up on the details. The fact that the story uses an extravagantly wealthy, slave owning master as a main character who likely represents the Lord raises our suspicions from the beginning. It only gets worse when the master returns and seems to act as harshly, or more so, than the third slave originally thought he would. If we take Jesus's use of this story as a tacit endorsement of the economics of his day and the realities of abusive labor within that society, then we surely will find ourselves cringing at this parable rather than considering the calling in it.

Adding to this discomfort is how the parable has been interpreted. Some interpretations of it have encouraged a prosperity gospel that praises those with money as the most faithful and condemns those without it as the least. The parable has been used to justify why some have so much wealth while others have so little because ultimately, this thinking goes, some have the ability to handle it and others don't. Yet if we've learned anything about systemic racism and the history of economic injustice in our country, we surely know that ability often has little to do with who accumulates wealth and who does not. So using this parable as if it is about the stewardship of financial resources, even for God's kingdom, is ultimately to miss the message.

I have a suspicion that some of the reason we so easily fall into these modes of understanding and others like them is because deep down they resonate with what we've come to believe about ourselves, about our world, and about God. Perhaps somewhere deep within us we believe, for better and for worse, that we are simply the one who has enough ability for just one talent, or two, or five. It's hard for us to imagine that we could at times and from different perspectives be any one of the servants or all three. Also, we've come to accept the economic systems of our world that justify the mass accumulation of wealth, rooted in a narrative of meritocracy—thinking those who worked the hardest are the ones who have accumulated the most, and they are to be praised. So we hear Jesus's story and infer an affirmation of the economics we know in spite of Jesus's upending of those economics all throughout his ministry. And finally, deep down, we fear what the third servant feared. In his perception, and too often in ours, God is ultimately unjust and cruel, and for those reasons worthy of our fear. Somehow, we've come to the conclusion that because God judges and will call for an accounting, God is ultimately out for our destruction—simply waiting on us to do the wrong thing before sending us to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But what if the third servant actually misjudged the master, and what if we have misjudged the primary point of the parable? What if we should not hear it as an endorsement of how the world worked in Jesus's day—with its mass wealth accumulation in the hands of a few and abusive use of those who labor to increase that wealth? And what if this parable isn't intended to be primarily about stewarding financial resources or even giving us a picture of the actual character of the master? What if Jesus's point was both simpler and yet more challenging, inspiring, and invitational? Perhaps the point of the parable and what we are to hear today is simply about what it means to live in the in-between of Christ's first coming and his second. Perhaps the point is as simple as a calling to be active in the world during this time of waiting. With the story of the bridesmaids, Jesus calls his disciples to be prepared for the Bridegroom's return. With the story of the talents, Jesus calls his disciples to be active in waiting for his return. Jesus calls you and me to be active as we wait for his return.

As we consider the details of the parable, we can gather wisdom about how Jesus's disciples are called to be active as we await Christ's return. I'll lift up two today. The first thing to notice is that the context of the parable is one of abundance. There is an abundance of wealth and an abundance of time. The servants have more put in their hands than is imaginable—what is received is extravagance upon extravagance—and they have it in their possession

for a long time. Two out of the three act as if the abundance is a gift. They act as if it is an opportunity for freedom in their action. One of the three acts as if the abundance is a burden, a thing to be afraid of, even buried. Two servants judged the master to be one who operates in the mode of abundance—where there is always enough, especially when it is used with others. The third servant judged the master to operate in a mode of scarcity—where limited resources should be stored away, protected for one’s own security in relationship to the master, and kept safe so no one could misuse them. As it turns out, looking through the eyes of scarcity does not inspire the kind of active waiting the master desires. To put it another way, discipleship driven by scarcity ends up dead and buried. Yet, discipleship driven by God’s abundance ends up joyful and multiplying.

I wonder what the context of your activity is. Do you find yourself assuming that the Christ who will return is abundant in his giving? Do you act as if the context of your life with God is full of mercies, love, and grace beyond what is reasonable? Do you feel the freedom to give and trade and use whatever you’ve been given knowing that the activity that moves you beyond a focus on yourself is pleasing to God in itself, even if the risk is losing everything? If so, I suspect you know some of the light and joy and community of the Lord’s kingdom even now. But perhaps you’ve only acted out of a presumed scarcity both in relating to God and others. And so you’ve protected yourself, closed yourself off from others, and attempted to risk nothing because when there is not enough, losing anything would be too much. The unfortunate consequence of living a buried life, where you assume there is not enough or that you are not enough, is you end up robbed of your freedom, pushed to the fringes, and without the joy of community.

A second thing to notice in the parable is the impact of action that is motivated by fear. The third servant buried what he was given because he was afraid. He had judged the master to be harsh and unjust, and it produced fear in him. Fear drove the servant to seek his own security. Ultimately, we do not know what inspired the other servants to act as freely as they did, and we do not even know why the third servant believed the master to be harsh. Maybe he had personal experiences that made him believe it to be true. Or maybe others had warned him about the master or demonstrated fear-driven action themselves, which caused him to fear. But what we know is that the servant was afraid of the master and of being accountable to him, so he buried what he received. Instead of his talent being active in the world, it was securely covered, presumably for his own protection. The result of this fear-based action in the end was a greater loss for everyone. As it turns out fear does not inspire the kind of active waiting the master desires. To put it another way, discipleship driven by fear ends up dead and buried. Yet, discipleship driven by freedom in Christ ends up joyful and multiplying.

Matthew’s Gospel does not shy away from the reality of accountability, and this parable does not either. But if the only thing we know is that there is accountability and if we misjudge the character of the one who will do the accounting, then we may very well miss the point all together. And what’s potentially worse is the impact it has on others, who learn from us to be fearful rather than free in God’s abundance. Ultimately acting in fear is a disservice not only to the Master and to ourselves, but also to the world around. Fearfully focusing on the accounting as if it is the whole point is like saying you get smaller as the plane flies higher. It’s part of the picture from a certain view, but looking at it alone makes us miss the fact we are flying in God’s abundant grace and love. And in missing this, even what we have is taken away from us. And we waste the present and future opportunity for living that is free, joyful, and community building.

As you live awaiting the Lord’s return, be active and live freely in God’s abundant grace and love that multiplies rather than shrinks. Because after all, you are flying, and the world is watching.