

So, You Knew, Did You?

Halloween is now behind us. Thanksgiving is 12 days away, then “Whammo!” We’ll be on the Advent Superhighway to Christmas! Do you know how I can tell? One of the ways I can tell is that so many of our lectionary readings these past several Sundays have been about Jesus’ coming-again to judge the earth and finalize the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Today’s text is no exception. In this ancient parable, with its outmoded language of slaves and masters and talents, coming to the disturbing end that it does, we are hearing a pointed and urgent warning that there will be a last judgment, and that folks had better be prepared. And I promise you that we shall not exhaust this topic here today. That is what Advent is for! So, get ready to get ready, a judgment is coming, a settling of accounts is unavoidable, either in this life or the next.

But how does one get ready for the judgment of the earth? How does one get ready for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth? Well, this parable seems to be saying that we will all be judged on how well our portfolios have done, does it not; how much money we have made on our investments, right? Well, if that turns out to be the case, that is probably pretty good news for most Presbyterians, although I, for one, would be in trouble! But before we decide that this parable is about how well our investments have done, let us take a little tour of Jesus’ most poignant and pointed teachings about money, and see if we are on the right track here.

An obvious starting place for this tour would be the Sermon on the Mount, where, sure enough, we find a major landmark. There Jesus steers us in a totally different direction. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth,” he says. Instead, Jesus recommends that we store up “treasures in heaven.” Then he thickens the plot when he offers this one, undeniable truth: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also!” And if the portfolio notion were not already being called into question, in the same Sermon on the Mount Jesus later says, “you cannot serve God and wealth.” ... I don’t know about you, but that about does it for me! But, just in case, there is more to encounter on this tour.

It seems Jesus was approached by a young nobleman, who was also very conscientious and very rich. This man was basically asking our very question, namely, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus offered the young ruler a smattering of commandments, all of which the young man could safely say he had kept. Then Jesus upped the ante, adding, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Whereupon the young man was crestfallen and went away disappointed. And as Jesus observed the rich, young ruler’s response, he wryly observed, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” So, what are the implications for our investments and portfolios and accumulation of wealth in light of the story of this disastrous meeting between Jesus the young nobleman? What are we to do? Empty our pockets, liquidate our investments, give it all away? How would that help our cause, especially if the criteria for the judgment is to grow our

investments!?! Things are not looking too well for this interpretation of our parable, are they?

Well, then, let us discontinue the tour, and look instead back into the parable at hand. There is some notable language in this parable, three different terms used by Jesus to speak of money. One is “property” as in the master “summed his slaves and entrusted his property to them.” That word is a great, big catch all of a word referring to all that would have belonged to the master: property, possessions, and investments. In other words, his net worth.

Another term is “talents,” which was originally a measure of weight, somewhere between 60 and 80 pounds, which then became a unit of coinage the value of which varied significantly depending upon the type of metal involved. You can imagine that, say, a 70 pound bar of gold would be worth more than a 70 pound bar of silver, which would be worth more than a 70 pound bar of copper; but all of them would have been worth a lot of money in Jesus’ time, perhaps as much as 15 years worth of wages for a common laborer. “Talents?” In other words, one’s livelihood!

Then the third term is simply “money,” as in “the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole and hid his master’s *money*.” This term is not so obscure; wherever we find it, it always means “currency,” and in Jesus’ day that was always coinage, and usually silver. Coin collectors today can show you wonderful specimens of these coins, including no few with emperor’s images on them. This is the term used in Jesus’ answer to the question about paying taxes. It is also used in the story of how the chief priests and elders paid Judas a sum of thirty pieces of silver to betray Jesus to them; and how, later, realizing what he had done, Judas attempted to return the silver coins, and when the authorities refused to take them back, he threw them all down on the floor of the temple, then went out and hanged himself. This is also the term used by Jesus when he sent his 12 disciples out on missions to preach and to heal. Jesus told them to take no staff, take no bread, and take no money. So maybe, just maybe, this parable is not about our money or our investments or our portfolios at all!

What is it about then? Well, there is one more notable term in this parable to consider before I tell you what I really think! That term is “harsh,” as in “Master, I knew you to be a harsh man.” This term has an interesting history, coming as it seems to come from nomads and other dwellers of wilderness and desert settings. It was originally used to describe the results of something that was once alive and supple that had laid out in the hot, dry desert sun for years and years, and had become dried out, desiccated and hard as a rock. By the time of Jesus, it was one of those highly colorful terms used to speak of someone who was cruel and merciless. Worse, by far, than even a Marine Corps drill sergeant!

This is the term that the unfortunate servant who had had one entire talent put into his trust used to describe the master. “Master, I knew you to be a harsh man,” he said. And in the same sentence, the servant says he “was afraid.” Imagine that! Cruel. Merciless. Harsh. Well, that would be someone to fear alright! And *that*, more than anything else, is what distinguishes this third servant from the other two. The first two seemed to respect the master, admire him even. One might say that they loved the master, in a manner of speaking: certainly not as lover, and not as best buddy; but as a beloved one, whose very being and qualities drew respect right out of them, and for whom they would do just about anything. The first two seemed excited to be given the

opportunity to put to work the treasures put into their trust. And the first two seemed to have absolutely no fear that any great harm at all would result from their tasks, from their efforts on the master's behalf, or from the master's settling of accounts. So here we begin to see what the parable is about: not clever money sense, not hard work, and not even the luck of the draw. It is about relationships, and the quality of those relationships.

The relationship between the master and the first two servants was one of trust, leading to partnership and sharing of responsibility and caring for one another and the things that matter to one another. Whereas the relationship between the master and the third servant was one of mistrust. Whatever perverted opinion the third servant had of the master, whatever he had come to expect from the master, whatever he had conjured in his heart, or head, or hands against the master, the third servant feared the master, and that made all the difference. It was an unhealthy, unfortunate relationship, which played itself out to the very end, indeed, the "outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

So, what do I really think? For today, and maybe for today only, but certainly for today, I believe this is about the invaluable gifts of love and life which God gives us. The great and abiding love of God poured out upon us, and the grace-filled life God gives us, could only be scorned or buried or squandered by those with the most unhealthy and mistrusting relationship with God our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. How can we who, by the grace and mercies and love of God, have been made children of God, not invest that very same love and grace and mercy in our own living and in our own places of the world. Not to do so truly would be a perverted, desiccated sort of life. Not to do so would only prove us to be the cruel, merciless and harsh ones.

On the other hand, to invest, to share, indeed, to give away the love of God, and thereby to value and protect and enhance the life God gives us and all things, is finally to hear the words we all long to hear: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master!"