

The Righteousness of Risk
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Matthew 25: 14-30

Tell me a story.

It's an invitation to engage another, to share insight from your own story that may illumine mine. Tell me a story...and in so doing reveal something of yourself. Your hopes, your fears, your dreams. Tell it in your unique voice, as only you can. "Different Voices, One Vision." The theme for this year's stewardship campaign was thoughtfully chosen to acknowledge the diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences of our congregation. Over the past few weeks, you've heard the witness of a middle-aged business man, a young adult who has very recently joined Fairmount, a parent and Sunday School teacher, a youth member involved in a mission trip, and a beloved, long-time choir member. Each has told something of their particular story and how this church has been meaningful to them, and I hope their stories have informed your own. I'm grateful for their sharing, as it has made it easy to see how rich the mix of this community is. What unites us across our differences is a single vision. Do you know what it is? What is *your* vision of Fairmount? And how do you see it being demonstrated day in and day out, year after year?

We might start with our congregation's mission statement: how we are called to worship God, to seek the way of Christ, and to build a community such that we make a difference in the world. Your leadership team of elders, trustees, deacons, and staff develops the budget, plans programs, and organizes for worship in light of that mission statement. But our mission statement is not a vision, though it's a critical means to embody a vision. Our vision is larger than even the sum of our worship and ministries and mission. It is a Divine picture of the world vibrant with the knowledge of God's love and creative power; living in peace together; all people enjoying abundance from the just distribution of earth's resources. We pray for the realization of that vision every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.* Our vision is nothing less than the Kingdom of God, the righteous rule of God experienced fully in *this* world, redeemed from terror, hatred, despair and death.

The vision of the Kingdom of God is shown to us through the life and teachings of Jesus, particularly in the stories he told called parables. Jesus was a master storyteller. Whether he was addressing a large crowd on a hillside, sharing a private moment with his disciples, or answering one of the religious leaders' trick questions, Jesus often used a story to make his point. In memorable, picturesque language, a parable communicates insight about God and God's Kingdom—and invites a response from those who hear. Hardly ever is the meaning of the parable immediately apparent: it's as if Jesus wants the listener to be drawn into it, to wonder, to ponder, to struggle, to allow the meaning to percolate through the filter of one's own experiences and needs.

But here is something curious: parables are not simply stories told to reinforce the kind of moral or religious values by which we are to live. Instead their intent is to reveal the character of the kingdom of God, and to invite the hearer to respond to Jesus and his mission to bring that kingdom to earth. They describe what life in the Kingdom of God is like, and what the ruler of that kingdom is like. Jesus' parables contrast the Kingdom of God with the kingdoms of this world, and call us to consider how we will live as citizens of both. In fact, the competing claims of these two kingdoms demand that a choice be made about one's primary loyalty, and may even bring us into conflict with one or the other. As has been observed, no one would have bothered to crucify an itinerant Jewish peasant who went around telling stories that encouraged proper moral behavior (Coleman, *Parables*, p. 6). Let's be very clear: the Kingdom of God is not simply an enlargement of the status quo, only more and better. No, these parables witness to a new kingdom all together, one that challenges conventional wisdom and calls us to a new way of life.

I've spent a little more time than usual setting the context for our morning gospel reading, but I've done so in hopes that we might hear it fresh today. Our text is familiar and one which regularly shows up in the lectionary in the Fall, just in time for the annual stewardship campaign: Matthew's version of the parable of the talents, in which financial resources are entrusted to three slaves by their master. It is told very late in Jesus' ministry—the week, in fact, of his betrayal and arrest. The parable is part of a larger section of Jesus' teachings about the coming of God's Kingdom and how the faithful should live in the meantime. We know this text. But watch out! At the time Jesus told the parables they offered a strong critique of prevailing religious and cultural practices. *And they still do.* A reading found on p. 28 of the New Testament portion of the pew/chapel Bibles. . . .from the gospel according to Matthew in the 25th chapter, at the 14th verse. Listen for God's Word to the Church! [Matthew 25:14-30]

What's so mysterious about this text? Seems pretty straightforward: A master departing on a journey, summons three slaves and gives to each a sum of money, "according to his ability." It's not a small amount either; a talent was worth more than 15 years' wages of a laborer. Two of the slaves get busy and double the sum. The third, however, buries his one talent in a hole he has dug in the ground. Upon the return of the master, the two are rewarded with the praise of their master, and are promised advancement. The one who buried his talent comes forward and returns it, explaining very simply: I was afraid of you; you are a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed. The master is enraged, takes the talent from him and gives it to the one who now has ten, and throws the slave out into what is clearly intended as a depiction of Hell. All right, already! We "get it"—if you use your God-given time, talent and treasure then you will be rewarded and blessed. If you don't...well, we can't guarantee the consequences, but they don't look promising for you. So, good and faithful brothers and sisters, mark your commitment cards and be generous.

Are you bothered by some aspects of this parable, as I am? For starters, equating this harsh and unmerciful master with God. The version of the same parable in the gospel of Luke is even worse: the returning master demands the slaughter of all the servants who have questioned his rule. Even in Matthew's toned down text, the master wields swift and violent judgment on the slave. If we connect the master in this parable with God, then what we have is a God who saves us by our works. This God condemns us without mercy if we have not. It's as if the Church says on 51 Sundays that the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting; by grace we are saved through faith, but on stewardship Sunday the Church says we are saved through the wise investment of our resources. On 51 Sundays we proclaim that your value to the church has nothing whatever to do with what you give, but on stewardship Sunday we as much as say that you are "wicked and worthless" if you don't. No wonder people are skeptical about "gratitude-based" stewardship campaigns—too often those campaigns have employed the oldest sales trick in the world: the old bait and switch!

If we don't want to go there, how can we hear this parable as instructive? Consider the experience of a certain North American theologian, who listened in on a Bible study of this text in a small Central American village, a group of barely-literate farmers discussing the meaning of Jesus' parable. They heard the story entirely differently! For them, the master was not God, but the powers of this world. The way the master treated the slaves paralleled their own experience of treatment by the governing authorities who bossed and oppressed them.

To this church in the so-called "third world", the hero of the story was the slave who buried the master's talent in the ground. He alone refused to go along and was willing to suffer the consequences. The two who have been traditionally held up as the "good" servants were seen as the ones who collaborate with the status quo, who have bought in to the interests of the powerful and now get paid off because the powerful reward loyalty. The peasant community also had a different understanding of the parable's observation that "to all those who have, more will be given...but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." In plain language they heard Jesus saying that in this world, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. [*I am indebted to insights by biblical theologian Ched Myers and the Rev. J. Stuart Taylor, from various writings*] Here, days before he would walk to his crucifixion, Jesus was asking his followers where their ultimate allegiance belongs: to the ruling powers of this world, or to the Kingdom of God; to the status quo, or to a new vision of a just community?

Could it be that the North American Church has had difficulty interpreting this parable because of where we stand in relation to it? Jesus warns of equating any government, any economic system, any religious institution with the Kingdom of God. Perhaps our citizenship in a nation increasingly characterized as "Christian", our benefit from a capitalist economic system, and our identification with the institutional church have served to dim the vision of God's Kingdom "on earth as in heaven." If so, then let us recover the essential message of our faith: that Jesus inaugurated a new day, that the Kingdom is coming, and is transforming this world by a vision of justice, peace, and abundant life for all. The great German theologian and martyr of the Nazi regime Dietrich Bonhoeffer posed the question that must be answered by every generation of Christians: Are we seeking a religion of "cheap grace" or are we prepared for costly discipleship? In the context of this stewardship season we might ask it this way: Is my financial commitment to the church an investment towards my personal peace of mind....or is it a reflection of my allegiance to the coming Kingdom of God? Is it payment for services rendered, or righteous risk-taking on behalf of a vision of faith as yet unrealized?

...or perhaps I should say, not *fully* realized. Do you see evidence of that coming Kingdom here, in the community of Fairmount? Do you experience in our worship, in our educational programs, through our mission, in the quality of our love for one another some sign that "though the wrong seems oft' so strong, God is the ruler yet?" The question we need to ask ourselves is not, how much can I afford to give to keep this institution running for another year? The more important questions concern our fidelity to the vision of God's Kingdom.

To what or to whom do I give my ultimate loyalty? What is God's claim upon my life? What is the cost of discipleship?

If you catch a glimpse a God's Kingdom in this place—however faint, however imperfectly—then count Fairmount as part of the cost of discipleship. Consider your commitment as the risk great love demands. Offer your money, your time and talents to this church as together we pursue a vision of the rule of God on earth as in heaven.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and mercy of God! For from God and through God and to God are all things. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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