

**Matthew 25:14-30 “The Timid Soul” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/27/24**

I was in line at the grocery store the other day when I overheard folks talking about the World Series. Somebody visiting up from LA was asked, “So you must be rooting for the Dodgers huh?” “No,” she responded, “I’m actually rooting for the Yankees because I always cheer for the underdog.” Many of us are like that woman and for this reason, we have trouble with this text – it is a hard text for hard times. When Jesus tells a story, he knows how to get our attention, which after all, is the first point in telling a good story – getting people to listen, and to pay attention – today’s text is definitely an attention getter! It’s terrifying punch line grabs our attention and we wonder if maybe, Jesus could have at least tried to be a bit more obscure, a little more gentle and fair in his summation?

Peter Gomes renamed this parable, “When the Gospel is Unfair,” and for good reason. If you are looking to be offended, or if you are seeking an excuse for not listening this morning, there it is for the taking – this story is unfair. Let’s cut to the chase, to the bottom line as they say – what gets our attention is the fate of the third slave and his poor business strategy. Jesus probably told this story multiple times as a version appears in the Gospel of Luke, using the term “pounds” rather than talents, and another version in The Gospel of the Nazarenes which was sort of a spin-off of Matthew that never made it into the Bible. Perhaps Jesus revised the story for different settings, to appeal in a special way to certain groups. As Matthew records it, a wealthy man gave sums of money called “talents” to three of his slaves before leaving on an extended journey. One talent in ancient economics was worth about 2 million dollars according to today’s standards. He gave one servant five talents or 10 million, another 2 talents or 4 million, and the third 1 talent or 2 million dollars. The text suggests there was an expectation as to the management of the money, for it says he gave amounts to each “according to his ability.” Not only were they not given equal amounts but their capacity to manage those sums was also not equal. When he returned, the men came in for an accounting. The one who had received five talents doubled the investment, as did the second. Both were warmly praised by their employer. After all, that’s the kind of person you want in charge of your business.

Now before we go any farther, we must be careful not to translate this story into how we should view the rich and prosperous of our time. Jesus would be horrified, dare I say offended, if we tried to take this story and make it a praise of today’s billionaires who have large sums of money because of their supposed abilities to handle such things. Within our

society, there are other factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation, family inheritance, and education that offset and skew one's abilities to accumulate and handle money. Also, Jesus would never imply that those who had money were smarter than those who didn't because what does that say about himself? The story thus progresses to the third servant, the underdog, who fears his master and being a timid soul, does not risk his talent but hides it in a hole in the ground to be returned when the time is right. The man brings back the one talent and gets royally chewed out by his Master, his coin is taken away, and he is banned from community, a fate worse than death. Literally, the text says he is thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. A 90-year-old woman was listening to this text and remarked, "Well Pastor, what if I have no teeth?" To which the Pastor responded, "No worries, teeth will be provided." I confess that I feel a bit sorry for the underdog here – maybe the world of business scared him, maybe no one ever entrusted him with 2 million dollars before. Suppose he invested it in a project that failed or put it in the bank and the bank collapsed like in '08? He was a timid soul, the kind of man who wore both a belt and suspenders, just in case. He did well enough under the direction of others but was terrified at the prospect of making decisions for himself. I understand this man, I was him 40 years ago.

Some say the key to good decisions, wise investments, is information not money. Your money is only as good as your information. So, what did the other investors know that our third slave didn't? If the most important thing is information, than maybe the worst thing is poor or wrong information. Gomes points out that the Master didn't deny the statements that he was a harsh man, so perhaps it was a matter of the slave acting badly on solid information – knowing what you need to know, realizing that the rumors are true, but you end up taking the wrong action, coming to the wrong conclusion. Consider where that plays out today – you hear rumors about folks that turn out to be factual, verified by those closest to that person who have no stake in the game except to speak truth. But wrong choices still are made despite the proven reality of multiple credible witnesses. During World War II, the French learned that the Germans traveled a set route which the French believed would become the route of the impending invasion. So the French built the best forts and barricades that money could buy in order to defend the line called the Maginot line, despite being warned by witnesses that the Germans would surprise them. Sure enough, the Germans went around the line and attacked from the sides and from the back. Again and again, we are reminded that accurate information presupposes intelligent use of that information, not denial.

Our third slave knew what he needed to know, that his master was hard and shrewd and had great expectations, and so for fear of losing what he had been given, he hid it, he stowed it away in a coffee can and buried it in the garden. Instead of “nothing ventured, nothing gained,” for him it was “nothing ventured, nothing lost.” If we read this as a parable about capitalism, it is a reassuring story for those of us who put our money in trusts and our trust in money. But at its heart, that isn’t what Jesus is saying – it isn’t about trust funds or investment strategies; it is about accountability, about doing the best we can on behalf of the One who has placed trust and confidence in us. It is a parable about good stewardship with responsibilities, incentives, and rewards, but it is so much more than that. It is about the use of our time while here on earth, the time between the beginning and the end, the “time being” as W.H. Auden would put it. Our story is told between the stories of the wise and foolish virgins and the last judgment, just before Jesus is delivered to his captivity and death on the cross. It is among the most significant last sayings of Jesus, placing a premium not on how to use and spend money but on how to use and spend time, especially as there isn’t very much of it left to go around.

In the last 3 parables in Matthew, Jesus warns that what counts is how we use what time we have, the resources we have been given, and how we redeem the present. When the master in the parable went away, he didn’t say how long he would be gone or when he would return. He left them with a splendid sense of insecurity, what has been called “creative insecurity.” The story was an invitation to see how, living in that insecurity, we will manage each according to our abilities. A Chinese proverb put it this way: “The one who uses their time to deliberate fully before taking a step will spend their entire life on one leg.” John Bach said, “To the timid soul, nothing is possible” while Teddy Roosevelt remarked, “There are timid souls who will never know victory or defeat.” The three last parables in Matthew provide a hint of what Jesus expects to be done until he returns, namely not sit around and wait, but do the works of him who sent us and not grow weary in good works. The third slave lost his nerve; he was given an opportunity and found himself in a state of paralysis. Filled with fear, fear that he won’t succeed, fear of the unknown and even the known which he doesn’t understand, he plays the safest game possible: no risk, no fault. Johan Richter once wrote, “A timid person is frightened *before* a danger, a coward *during* the danger, and a courageous person *afterwards*.” Now is not the time for fear or inaction. Whereas caution might have its place, the servant is more interested in protecting himself and denying the trust that has been given to him. In the

modern sense, he refused to use his talents, a word that no longer means money but means rather the God-given combination of ability and opportunity. Such talent is the gift of God, hence the talent doesn't really belong to the talented but to God, who gives it. God asks that our abilities, opportunities, and our finances be put to good use, and that nearly always means put at risk. If a talent is to grow, it must be put to good use in the time we have been given.

The rabbis teach us that when a wise person heard that the end of the world was near, that person went out into the garden and planted a tree, an act of courage, audacity, and hope – the only reasonable response. If we give serious consideration to using our talent, time, and treasure to do all the good we can, for as long as we can, than neither our church nor the entire realm of God need ever fear the times in which we live. Amen.