

A Parable of Responsibility and Accountability

Matthew 25:14-30

'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. --Abraham Joshua Heschel

Today we have the second parable in Matthew 25. Jesus says, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them..." "It" refers to the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Parables are meant to open up our minds, our insight, and deepen our awareness of life in relationship to God. The parables in Matthew 25 invite us to reflect on life in the ultimate and deepest sense, what matters most in the end.

Matthew is writing a couple of generations after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Christian community is realizing that the hoped-for return of the triumphant Christ is not going to happen any time soon. The ultimate unfolding of God's will for the world cannot be put on a calendar or clock, in spite of the continuing efforts of some to do so. We are in a time of watchful waiting, of spiritual alertness. That is what the previous parable of the ten girls and their lamps seemed to be about. The spiritual life is bringing our own oil, being alert to our own relationship with God, being awake to life here and now, ready to perceive God's kingdom whenever and wherever it appears. It has to do with what we call the inward journey, paying attention to our lives in relationship with God.

Jesus' community does not sit around twiddling its thumbs, marking time until the full dawning of God's kingdom. We participate in that kingdom now. We are part of its dawning. When we pray The Lord's Prayer, what we are really saying is "Let your kingdom come and your will be done on earth as in heaven beginning with my own life." As Jesus' community we are to live fully in the world. We have all we need--the teachings of Jesus, the example of his life, the presence of his spirit, and in all of this, the gift of the fullness of God's love.

This parable has to do with the most meaningful way to live our lives as those who have become aware of our relationship with God. For us here in the Church of the Covenant, this parable can be richly understood through the lens of what we call ultimate responsibility and accountability. We recognize and affirm the importance of each person taking ultimate responsibility for her or his life of faith in the inward and outward dimensions. Along with that, it is important to find ways of being held accountable for the life of faith we undertake so that we stay on track. Without accountability, we don't grow and deepen. Without taking ultimate responsibility, we are always looking to someone else to do for us what we need to do for ourselves, or we find ourselves living vicariously through someone else's faith and experience instead of our own. Without ultimate responsibility and accountability, we tend to drift through life, bouncing along the surface, not really claiming and living our own lives to their fullness.

A wealthy man is going on a journey. He entrusts his money to his servants. One gets five talents, another two, another one. A "talent" was a sum of money worth about fifteen years' wages of a laborer. So, even the servant who gets the one talent has an enormous sum. I think it is safe to say that the sums of money represent the overwhelming goodness and blessing of God. It is a statement that life is, in its nature, abundance, not scarcity, that we have everything we need to live fully as God's children. Why do some get more than others and what is the significance of it? We don't know. The parable doesn't encourage us to waste our time pondering it. It is enough to say that every person is a beloved and cherished child of God who lavishes upon us all far more blessings and goodness than we are even aware of.

The man apportions the property according to abilities. Abilities vary. Not everyone is the same. The parable speaks of a simple reality of life as we observe it. Some have more abilities than others, but each has something to offer. The parable doesn't dwell on why this is so and it does not support a competitive view -- I have more ability than you have! Life is not a contest.

Many of us are keenly aware that there are those who seem far more capable than we ourselves are. We are quick to feel our own deficiencies and to measure ourselves against others. We do this in the religious community. We love to lift up the “saints,” those who have lived extraordinary lives of sacrifice and so forth. I grew up in a minister’s family, and we always had missionaries coming to visit the churches my father served. I would sit in our living room and listen to the wondrous stories of Africa or India or South America. I remember Dr. Victor Rambo, for instance, who pioneered cataract surgery in the mission field. He was one of those larger than life figures. Tall. Athletic. A powerful personality. He would have me and my friends out in our back yard doing calisthenics every time he could catch us.

The problem with always lifting up some as extraordinary is that it fosters a competitive spirit and a tendency to measure ourselves against others. Then we develop inferiority complexes. We neglect doing the things that we ourselves are called and gifted to do because they seem so unimportant. That’s why I don’t like talking about spiritual heroes. It doesn’t hurt to be inspired by others’ lives. However, it ends up being an avoidance, causing us to take our eyes off our own lives and gifts and callings, whatever they may be. The parable does not allow us to go there. There are different capabilities. Some may achieve “bigger” things than others. That’s just the way it is. But the parable and Jesus himself are not interested in spiritual hero-worship or competitiveness.

The point is to receive and embrace our own lives, to do with who we are and what we have been given. If we do that faithfully, we will be surprised at how we will nourish life around us and how our own lives will become filled with joy. We are to drop all the mental habits of comparison and self-measuring. The thing is to know who we are and what we have been entrusted with. There is no small thing. Big and small do not enter into it. We can always do more than we think we can do, but that happens only as we are faithful to the gifts with which we have been entrusted and to the particular calling that God has placed in our hearts. Faithfulness is ours; the results belong to God.

So, what do these servants do with the money entrusted to them? The first two go out and invest it, doubling the master’s assets. When the master returns, they bring him his money and the interest. He responds: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into my joy.” They have taken a risk with what was entrusted to them. They could have lost the whole thing. But it seems that they did what the master hoped they would do—take what they had been entrusted with and try to make more with it.

This is a familiar theme with Jesus. The life of faith, of living as we were created by God to live, is about risk, opening ourselves up, enlarging our hearts. It is not playing it safe, grasping onto security. The life of faith means questioning, searching, finding out for ourselves. It means being open, not closed. It means letting go, not grasping. Jesus also said: Those who hold onto their lives will lose them; those who lose their lives for my sake and the gospel will find them. He told a little parable about how it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter God’s kingdom. The life of faith is about traveling light—dropping our opinions, our fears, our guilt, our regrets, our hurts—whatever keeps us from being open to God and to the life God created us to live.

The other thing is this: The servants are not really rewarded with anything but the joy of their master. What does he say? You have been faithful over a little; I will put you in charge of more. The reward of faithfulness is more faithfulness! There is a Jewish saying: The reward for keeping the Law is more keeping of the Law. Or we might put it this way: The reward for loving as God has loved us is more loving as God has loved us! Growing in our capacity to live by faith is its own reward. We don’t struggle to live a life of faith in order to gain something materially or even spiritually. We do it in order to live the way we were made to live, to be who we were made to be. “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” That’s how Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it.

Then there is the third servant. He has played it safe. He buried his portion in the ground so it would not be lost or stolen. He returns it to the master safe and sound. He did not lose it, but neither did he make anything with it. The master is indignant. “You wicked and lazy servant! You did this because you were afraid of what I would do if you lost my money.” The parable takes an ugly turn here. The one talent is taken away

from that servant and given to the one who had the most. The order is given to cast the third servant into outer darkness and eternal punishment. The temptation here is to identify the master with God, which raises all sorts of problems for us and the kind of God who would fall into such a rant. It is good to remember that Jesus tells the parable to deepen our understanding of the kingdom of God. Remember, it is the whole story that tells us of God's kingdom, not the individual parts by themselves. Jesus is teaching a deep spiritual reality here. When we approach life conservatively, fearfully, always taking the most secure route, never risking anything, grasping our life tightly for fear of losing it—what happens? We suffocate. Life shrinks. We end up losing instead of gaining. I think that the third servant allowed his fear to dictate his life. I think that the other two probably had the same fear, but they embraced it without letting it determine how they would live. It is not about never having fear, not being afraid that we might fail or mess up or whatever. It is about being afraid but living openly and open-heartedly anyway! It is about growing in our capacity to be at home with uncertainty, with risk, with openness and generosity of spirit. It is about finding out for ourselves what the life of faith is about.

I think this is why Jesus taught that children are closer to God's kingdom than we are. They are completely open and fearless. Not that they don't feel fear. They do. It's just that they don't let fear dominate their lives until we adults teach them to do that. I worked for two years at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center as an orderly on the cardiac surgery and medical division, fulfilling my obligation as a conscientious objector. I saw every day the courage of children facing things that would stop me cold in my tracks. It was not that they weren't afraid of needles or tests or surgery or even dying; it's just that they did not let their fear dominate their lives. They were able to face what they had to face with open spirits and hearts.

One last thought. Sometimes Jesus' parables have these harsh endings. Being thrown into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We like nicer endings. We prefer a spirituality that is, you know, kind of warm and cozy and gentle. The most profound spiritual traditions know that there are some spiritual realities that are so crucial to our lives that they need to be said in as strong a way as possible. These extreme ways of teaching are so that we really pay attention to what is most important, so that we do not miss the life God created us to live because we are distracted by so many lesser things.

Every one of us has abundance of life. Whatever our abilities, we each can claim the life God gave us and do something with it. We can live fearlessly, even though we have fears. We can live generously, regardless of how much or little we think we have. We can enter into and share God's own joy as we live these lives God gave us to live.