

How are we to make sense out of this week's Gospel lesson? Jesus's Parable of the Talents is definitely a challenging text for us. On one level it looks like God plays favorites. After all, one servant received 5 talents, another two, and another one. It reminds me of a Christmas present our nephew once gave to Amy. It was a coffee mug coaster that read: "Jesus loves you... but, I'm His favorite!" Seriously, does God play favorites? We will get to that, I promise!

But first, I would like to point out that for other reasons and for a *long* time Americans have struggled with the parable of the talents. Early in our history, this parable was actually used *against* America! Preachers in England during the 1600's saw the Puritans as unprofitable servants, declaring that their emigration to America was God casting them into a land of darkness, where there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (I guess there were some pretty hard feelings there!) Later on, though, this same parable was used *for* America as revivalist preachers declared America to be a place of opportunity, where profitable servants would be blessed. Faithful stewardship would result in financial prosperity. In other words, there's a lot of cash value in being a Christian.

We continue to struggle with this parable today, but our struggle is a little bit different. *Our* culture in America challenges us with the way it imagines God and the way it tempts us to mis-value God's gifts to His people.

In this parable, Jesus is not talking about America. He's preaching the kingdom of *heaven*. But His preaching does challenge our American misconceptions. Jesus doesn't invite us into a world of earthly wealth, where faith is driven by profit motives, but into a world of divine love, where faith responds to God's love in joyful service to others.

When the Master returns to settle accounts, Jesus wants you to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master" (vv 21, 23). To help make sure this will happen, let's consider this morning, "What Does It Mean to Enter into and Live in Our Master's Joy?"

All three of our readings today, just like last Sunday, turn our attention toward the end times, and the vision we see is not a pretty one. In fact, it is frightening. We heard these ominous words from the prophet Zephaniah, "the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter; the mighty man cries aloud there. A day of wrath is that day, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness," (Zeph.1: 14-15) Paul, too, warns us in our Epistle lesson of what it is certain to take place "(T)he day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While

people are saying, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman and they will not escape." (1 Thess. 5: 2-3)

But these frightening words, and others like them from the Bible, can cause us to overlook one of the most horrifying details of all. In the parable of the talents, the cause of the unprofitable servant's damnation is his **own imagination**. He chooses to live with a master he has **imagined** rather than the master who has revealed his generous **love**.

In the parable, Jesus reveals a **generous** master, one who gives all that he has into the hands of his servants. The amount that the master entrusts to his servants is astounding. Just one talent is worth twenty years of daily labor. And later, the master says that this was only a little as he sets his faithful servants over much.

The unprofitable servant, however, lives with a different master, the master he has **imagined**. For him, the master is 'a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed' (v 24). It's that belief that causes him to be greatly afraid. It paralyzes him so that he buries his master's talent in the ground. When the master returns to settle accounts, he judges the servant according to what he has believed. As the servant believes, so shall it be done to him. Because he didn't trust in the loving generosity of his master, the servant is cast out into darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Here's how this parable applies to us today: Jesus has come revealing to us the generosity of God. His Father's love is not to be measured in amounts of money but in the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. Jesus brought into this world a love that was priceless, a love that would not balk at the cost of sin, a love that would suffer death and eternal damnation so that the debt of all humanity would be paid and every sin would be forgiven before God.

Unfortunately, there are many in our world who turn away from this revelation of God. Such love seems brutal, violent, uncivilized, and they would rather live with the god they imagine than the God Jesus reveals.

The god they imagine, though, is not hard and demanding and someone to be feared (like the servant's imaginary master). No, the modern American god, lower-case "g" that is, is seen as all-loving. He is like a kindhearted grandfather, too weak to do any harm but strong enough still to love us. Instead of repentance, this god calls for tolerance. Instead of forgiveness, this god offers acceptance. So, turning from sin and being forgiven seem like strange activities to those who believe in the American god. Why all of this talk about sin? After

all, nobody's perfect, and God is love. People in our world imagine they can stand before God with all of their sins and be accepted for who they are and tolerated for what they have done.

Unfortunately, this god is a figment of the American imagination, and, in the end, he will not save. God saves us not by our imagination but by His action. In Jesus Christ, God has entered into our world and acted to save. His love goes beyond our wildest imagination. He saves not by becoming what we want Him to be but by being the One we need Him to be - our Savior. Our Savior knows the very real danger of sin and so He calls us to repent. Our Savior knows the eternal cost of sin and so He dies under our eternal punishment. But our Savior also knows the eternal joy of salvation and therefore rises again, not to tolerate sin and accept sinners but to forgive the repentant and invite them to live in eternal joy. Entering into our Master's joy means turning away from America's god and trusting the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who gave His life for us that we might live in eternal happiness and joy.

While one servant fears the master he has *imagined*, the other servants trust the master they *know*. Their master is a gracious and generous man. Instead of *harshly* ruling over them, he *graciously* rules *through* them. He gives them his great wealth for service in the world. He divides his possessions between them according to their ability (v. 15) and sends them out as servants differently gifted but equally loved. Each servant is *loved*. He is part of the household of a generous master. But each servant is differently gifted: one receives 5 talents, one 2, and one 1. Living in their master's joy means rejoicing in faithful service, differently gifted but equally loved. There's the answer to my earlier question: No, God does not play favorites. Jesus loves us all equally!

The fact that the master gives to each servant differently can be troubling to us. It looks like God does not love everyone *equally*. In our culture of consumerism, we associate having more with being better. So obviously the servant who has five talents is better than the servant who has two. In our profit-driven culture, we associate making more with doing better. So obviously the servant who makes five talents does better than the servant who makes two. Those kinds of attitudes cause us to divide ourselves into those whom God loves more and those whom God loves less based on our abilities.

The master, however, receives *both* servants with joy. He says, "'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master'" (vv 21, 23). God's love for *us* delights in *our* differences and rejoices in the various ways He has created us for service. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, "If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an

ear, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Cor. 12:17). Our service to God doesn’t earn us a place in His kingdom. God has freely given us that in Christ. Yet this God who freely offers His love equally to all people also delights in our differences. He values each of our different abilities. He lets us know that our service, no matter how big or small, brings Him great joy. Sharing in His joy means rejoicing in the various places He has called us and the various gifts He has given us for service. In service to God, we reveal the unlimited variety of His goodness to the world.

Entering into and living in our Master’s joy, then, does not mean comparing ourselves with others to see how well we’re doing or dividing ourselves from others as though God loves some of us more than others. Instead, it means trusting in what God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ—that He loves all of us equally—and faithfully serving in the various places where God has called us in our homes, our communities, our schools and places of work. We may be differently gifted by God, but we are definitely equally and forever loved by Him! Amen.