

November 19, 2023
Stewardship & Anniversary Sunday
The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

Friends, today is our final Sunday in our Season of Gratitude

It is the Sunday we celebrate the fruitful labors of our Stewardship Campaign

And, we mark the 50th anniversary of our congregation

I couldn't be more grateful for the lectionary text appointed for this morning

The wild thing is: I'm serious!

If the readings today had been some of the ooey-gooey, fluffy texts about God's love, and God's generosity, and God's abundance it would have been too easy!

I could speak for days to those qualities of our God and to those qualities of our faith life here in the context of St. Bart's

I'm glad the Holy Spirit is keeping things, let's say: interesting!

Some folks who read this text skip over the challenging bits of interpreting the interactions between the Master and his servants and point, rather, to the last few lines and argue that this is a text about God's abundance and of God's desire for individuals to prosper financially: "to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance" (vs 29)

In this line of thinking, often referred to as the Prosperity Gospel, abundance of wealth is a sign of God's blessing, lack of wealth is a sign of God's...curse? (you can see why this line of interpretation grinds for me)

In this same line of thinking, joy and happiness are signs of God's abundant blessings in your life, sadness and grief and depression are...I can't even finish that sentence.

But this text is widely used and taught in support of this line of interpretation.

However, Carla Works, Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. argues that "Contrary to what might be modeled by some best-selling televangelists, the parable does not justify a gospel of economic prosperity. Instead," she says, "it challenges believers to emulate their Master by using all that God has given them for the sake of the kingdom."¹

In other words, this text *is* about God's abundance, but rather than it being a text about God's desire for God's people to prosper financially, this text is about God's desire for God's people to persevere in service to the Kingdom

"Persevere" is defined by Google as to "continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty"

What Dr. Works helps to point out in her commentary on this text is that an alternative interpretation of this parable is that God has given us gifts for the running and building up of the Kingdom of God on earth with the hopes that we will make it prosper (not ourselves prosper, but the beloved community which God envisioned)

The troubling interaction between the Master and the servant is to point out that, in some instances, rather than watching the kingdom prosper in our care, God has found some of us indifferent or worried only about what we have rather than sharing and growing God's gifts in our midst

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-matthew-2514-30-7>

This lesson is told in the form of a parable, and it is a story that probably resonated deeply with Matthew's audience – but, it gets a little lost in translation for us in the 21st Century

The message, however, is no less important.

God has entrusted us with a portion of God's ministry in order that we would use our abilities — God-given abilities — in order to prosper God's kingdom. And some of God's people have truly taken their gifts and run with it. Some of us, however, have been too afraid to take a risk — even though God has been known to be risky in God's endeavors. Instead, some folks are more likely to secure their own well-being rather than take risks for the sake of the kingdom

It can be tricky not to continue to take this parable literally and think that the "gift" from God is money as it is in the parable and as it is in Prosperity Gospel interpretation

But remember, the parable is an allegory, a teaching lesson

In many other places of the Bible, the gifts from God are listed as Spiritual gifts, like in Paul's letters, where at the end of the text in 1 Corinthians 13 he writes "faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love"

I'm not one to deny that money can and should be used in the way of a spiritual gift – I think that's a powerful, Christian relationship to money that can be quite countercultural to how our society values money

But the greatest of these is love, the greatest of these is God's grace

God has given us an inheritance from God's kingdom and the greatest of these is love

This reminds me of how my seminary preaching professor used to describe God's grace: he described it as a gift that you did nothing to receive – it's not your birthday, you didn't make some big accomplishment, it's not church parishioner appreciation day – you simply look down into your hands and there is a gift and nothing you do or *could* do would make you unworthy of that gift and make it go away

The question is, what do you do with the gift?

Now that you know you have it, now that you know you possess it, now that you know what it is and how significant it is: what do you do with that gift?

Do you hide it? Something so significant might be worth hiding, or as the servant in the parable did: bury it in the ground for safe keeping

This is kind of the lesson that my stoic, Scandinavian ancestors handed down over the generations summarized in the Ole and Lena joke that is shared often in my family: "You know Ole loved Lena so much, he almost told her once."

Do you flaunt your gift? Put that gift in a special glass box and go around touting your good fortune in front of others, it *is* a highly-desirable gift after all

I feel like this response has Prosperity Gospel written all over it again and I think I made myself clear in how I feel about that

Or how about: Do you share the gift? Do you seek out others who are in need of what you have, do you seek out others who also have this gift and find ways to connect and share your gift?

Remember Dr. Works pointed out that this parable is about challenging "believers to emulate their Master by using all that God has given them for the sake of the kingdom."

She goes on to say that “emulating the ministry of Jesus” is “[announcing] the arrival of God’s kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least.”

Do you see now how this text is a great Gratitude - Stewardship - 50th anniversary text?

As God’s beloveds, we have, each of us, been bestowed a portion of God’s ministry – whether you think of it as God’s grace, or God’s love, or God’s justice, or God’s mercy, or God’s forgiveness – however it is helpful for you to think about, look down in your hands and see the gift that you hold

It is yours, beloved! It is both God’s gift and God’s charge: do something with it!

Sometimes, it is quite beneficial to be risky with what God has given us for the sake of God’s kingdom

50 years ago, it was risky to try to start a church in Yarmouth – and there have been moments in the history of our church when it hasn’t always felt like the experiment was working

But over time, others who have this gift from God also within their grasp and who are willing to persevere – to “continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty” – and the fruits of their offerings are the vibrant community before you today

Matthew’s parable speaks to us as a community, and as a Church, and as individuals

What will we do with this wonderful gift we have been given?

Might we persevere in a ministry that truly emulates our “Master” – “feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least?”

As a community, as a Church, as individuals

Might we share this mighty gift we have been given for the building up of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven?

I pray that we, St. Bart's, will continue to do exactly that together.

Amen.