

The Parable of the Talents

Sermon for November 15th, 2020

Rev Judy Steers

This is one of the most confusing and little understood parables, and one that is frequently misinterpreted.

On the surface it seems very unfair – the one to whom much was given, even more was added. And to the one who was given just a little, even the little was taken away. Not only that, but that frightened one was flung into the outer darkness to weep and gnash their teeth.

Let us be very clear what this parable is NOT about.

It's not about money, shrewdness with capital gains or lucrative investments. It's a parable. In parables, things in the story ALWAYS stand for other things.

It's also not about your skill with woodworking, your virtuosity as a saxophone player, or deftness with knitting needles – that is, it is not about the things that you are good at, or have some natural skill with. That is the confusing part about the word “talents” because it is a synonym for ‘skills’ in English. In the Biblical sense it is from the Greek “talanton” meaning measure or weight – of money, or payment. So, it's not about using your talents or they will disappear – which was a warped way of my sister's piano teacher to scare her into practicing. Or as I got told in youth group “Use your talents for God's glory, or God will take them away”. That is not what this is about.

To explore the parables is to consider how a symbol is being used. In this case, it is being used humorously. “Imagine” Jesus said “The master is going on a trip so he gives five wheelbarrows of money to one of his slaves”. Which would have made the listeners howl with laughter at how preposterous the story already is. “And then to another, he gives two, and to another one big wheelbarrow”. This is a ridiculous and hilarious story and he has everyone's attention at this point. Even the last one has enough. More than enough. More than they need, more than they've ever seen. And given according to their capacity.

To find the meaning in the symbol of this extravagant story, let us consider the economy of God. For the economy of God is not measured in your worth, your capacities, your financial resources, your security or the things you are good at. The economy of God, that pervades the whole of the Gospel, is grace and mercy.

To one was given five measures in the economy of God's grace and mercy - that one in turn gave grace and mercy times five. To another, two measures. And this too was multiplied into the lives of others. But one received grace, and did not offer grace. Was given mercy, and was not

merciful. Now, it makes more sense that this one, who did not show mercy after being showered with more than enough, was ordered cast out into darkness.

But what IS grace? How do we give mercy, in our day to day life?

A bishop friend of mine once defined it like this, to a group of teenagers. “Grace” he said “Is when you get what you don’t deserve”. “And mercy”, he continued “is when you DON’T get what you DO deserve”. Every teenager in the room got that. They all knew times when they should have ‘got it’, but they didn’t, because a parent or teacher was merciful.

I want to make sure you really have this, so I’m going to tell you a story about Grace, and Mercy. Yes, it’s another story about my kids, and it’s a good one. I should tell you that, we have an agreement, that before I tell a story about them in a sermon I have to ask their permission. “I want to tell the story about grace and mercy” I said and they replied “Oooh – that’s a good one – yes, tell that story”

We had just moved to Guelph. We were living temporarily in a small bungalow. My son was 8, my daughter, 10.

One day my son had a new friend over to play. Things were peaceful, kind of quiet and suddenly I heard a great shout of anger, scuffling of feet and a huge wail from my daughter. My son, in an uncharacteristic move of perhaps showing off to his new friend, skulked unseen into his sister’s room...and stole her diary. He and his friend had disappeared into an unseen corner to open and read it.

Two things happened. She burst into angry tears with a great wail of “My. Life. Is. OVER!!” thinking that now every secret she had would be told to every child across her new school. Simultaneously, the boys scurried into my son’s room and slammed the door. I knocked, opened the door and found my son’s friend standing looking sheepish and confused, but - no son. “Where did he go?” I asked, and the friend meekly pointed out the window. It was a ground floor window, before you get too alarmed.

I said to the friend “I think it’s time to go” and he nodded vigorously. I collected my son from outside the house where he was hiding behind a bush outside his bedroom window, and the three of us walked the two blocks to his friend’s house. I reported to his mother what had happened and, glaring at her son as she spoke said, “We’ll have a little conversation – thank you”. Then, we walked home.

My son is a boy who wears his feelings very openly, and very VERY easily feels guilty. As we walked, he started a litany; “Ground me forever!” he implored “Take away my allowance for a year” and, (the worst plea which broke my heart), he held out the back of his hand and said “Just...hit me!” (I had never ever hit him before). He was trying to head off the worst of anger and disappointment by calling out every possible punishment he could imagine. I quietly said “I am not going to do any of those things. When we get home, you are going to go to your sister, and tell her you’re sorry, and give her your assurance that you will never, ever repeat anything that you read in her diary to anyone.” He went silent – for him, facing the person he wronged was the hardest thing to do. He feels everything very deeply, and at that moment, he felt shame.

We got home. His sister was still steaming, though the tears of lament had abated. He was not ready to voice his shame, so he retreated to his room. He was also not sure he was ready for mercy and would prefer to be punished rather than risk standing in front of it.

My daughter and I went for a walk to cool her down. Through spitting anger and despair she said. "He stole my diary!! He stole my secret stuff and he is going to tell everyone." "No he's not," I said, "When he is ready, he is going to apologize and tell you that he won't tell anyone what he read".

After a few minutes of silent scheming she spat out venomously, "you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to go to school on Monday and tell everyone what he did, and tell them what a little \$#!& he is!" I looked at her and said "And what would you be doing, if you did that?"

She stopped. And to her immense credit she thought about this, deflated her puffed up self-righteousness and said "I would trying to get revenge, and I'd be doing exactly what he did to me". "Yes", I said, giving her the language, "you would be robbing him of his dignity, just as you are afraid that he will rob you of yours. I can assure you he feels so ashamed, he won't ever breathe a word. But, he needs your mercy. And you, need to give him grace, by saying nothing - to anyone - about what happened."

(And speaking of grace, you who are parents, you know that the grace is that sometimes, very occasionally, you pick the right words to say. It doesn't happen often, or at least, that is the way it feels sometimes. Once or twice, I feel like I got it right. Those are the stories I tell, but there's plenty others when I didn't get it right.)

When we returned he apologized and gave his assurances - reluctantly, face cast down, and when she said "I forgive you, I believe you" he ran off angrily and hid for a while. Such is the weight of mercy, and it is a hard thing for an 8 year old boy to bear the burden of being forgiven. Such complicated feelings for a small heart.

And to you who have been given a hundred weight of God's grace and mercy, wheelbarrows full, and more than you could ever need - what will you do with it? Will you bury it, or hide it in shame or fear? Or will you have the courage to give it on? The place of wailing, of gnashing teeth is not the external torment of judgment, rather, it is the inner battle of resisting grace and mercy being given to us, and the humility of allowing it to flow through us, and on to others. This is what Jesus calls us to today.