

More Than a Moral Tale about Trying Harder

A sermon based on Matthew 25:14-30

by Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
November 14, 1999

I admitted, a few weeks ago, to being easily confused. I am also easily puzzled. I was puzzled this past week by the reactions to the finding of a U.S. judge who has concluded that Bill Gates' Microsoft company is a monopoly. I was puzzled by the reaction, in part because the finding is still short of a final verdict in the anti-trust suit against Microsoft, and in part because Gates and his company elicit such strong reactions. Commentators were quick to respond, some to vilify Gates and his company, others to rise to his defence.

It seemed to me that the reactions were more than just an attempt to wring a byline out of a conspicuous event. There was more passion and venom in the reactions than usual. Some contend that Microsoft is such a large company because Bill Gates has been smart. They point out that he took risks, and that if there weren't risks in being an entrepreneur, we'd all be entrepreneurs. They contend that many people resent Gates because he took a gamble, and he won.

Others point out that Gates was not born with a cardboard spoon in his mouth; indeed, that he was privy to a multi-million dollar trust fund that his parents set up for him, and that his story is far from the classic rags-to-riches story. They point out that Gates is proof that one doesn't have to be a genius to be rich, especially if you buy out those who are smarter than you. More caustic critics point out that Gates personifies the wisdom, "You reap what you sue!"

In his defence, others contend that yes, Gates may have more money than anyone else in the world, but he also produces a product that people want and can afford. And furthermore, Gates has given away more money than any of us will earn in a lifetime.

I'm puzzled by the vehemence of opinions about Gates. Perhaps resentment fuels some of the criticism; perhaps admiration motivates others in his defence. I don't know. Our economic suppositions appear to be rooted so deeply that they are easily threatened by the destiny of one company!

A Puzzling Parable

I confess that I am also confused by our gospel reading this week, and even more by the responses of commentators, and perhaps for the same reason. The way one reads this gospel story also reveals a lot about one's economic suppositions. Let me take you down the pathways of my puzzlement in an effort to explore the meaning of this parable.

The bare skeleton of the story is of a man who goes on a journey and entrusts his property--in the form of gold, hard currency--to three of his slaves. One is given five units of money, another two units, and the third slave is given one unit. During the man's absence the first two slaves traded their master's money, doubling the amount they had

each been allotted. The third slave buried his money in the ground. When the master returned, and the three respective accounts are settled, the first two slaves are commended for doubling their master's money, indeed, are given added responsibilities.

The third slave returns to his master the very amount his master gave to him! He confesses his fear to the master, and his fear appears justified, for he receives no commendation, no added responsibilities; indeed, his master is angry with him, saying, "...you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest." (25:27) The master then takes the one talent away from this slave and tells him, essentially, to go to hell! (25:30) Allow me to make some elementary observations about the text of this puzzling parable:

1. Firstly, this is a parable about money. Not only are we talking about money, we're talking about a lot of money! A talent was a sum equal to 15 years' worth of wages for the average worker--worth anywhere from a half million dollars to two million dollars in our own day. It's an enormous amount of money. Even the slave with but one talent held an extraordinary sum in trust.

2. Secondly, the master leaves no specific instructions with the slaves. The text says that he "entrusted" his property to them, so we can assume that he didn't want them to squander it. No written contract is in evidence, however, and no detailed work order is left for them. The master simply trusted his slaves' discretion. In the absence of a specific instruction to trade the talents, it is curious that the third slave is faulted for taking alternative action.

3. Thirdly, the slaves, just like us, are not all dealt the same hand. One is dealt one talent; another two, another five, yet the text makes little of the discrepancy, simply noting that they were entrusted with varying sums, "to each according to his ability" (25:15). The text gives no indication that the slaves themselves are bothered by the discrepancy.

Are the Wealth Producers the Heroes?

Perhaps Jesus' parable would be less puzzling if we could identify the hero of the story. The obvious answer for most of us would be the two slaves who doubled their master's money! They are the ones who receive the master's commendation, twice repeated: "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." (25:21)

These two slaves are the parable's "wealth producers," and had Nortel Networks chief executive John Roth lived in that day, he would have warned the Jerusalem Chamber of Commerce that their brains were in danger of moving south, perhaps into Egypt.

This line of interpretation leaves us with the moral that Christian discipleship involves risk. The two wealth-producing slaves are hailed as skilful traders and investors. The master's commendation, coupled with the punishment of the third slave, seems to indicate that God wants us to be investors, initiators, risk-takers! The ones who take risks receive the rewards! The trite moral of the story is: Use it or lose it! Our muscles atrophy if we do not use them. Our money depreciates in value if we do not invest it. Our faith depreciates if we don't put it into practise.

It sounds like a reasonable lesson to draw from the story, for caution certainly does not always serve us well. A church does eventually bury its members, but before that

happens, each of us is expected to "bear some fruit". (Mark 4:20) A church that buries its talent in the ground has forgotten its missionary reason for existence!

One person remembers this parable as one of the stories used to frighten children in Sunday School into trying a little bit harder. His Sunday School teacher was also his fourth grade teacher, and her single-minded lesson for children was this: all children have talent; some have more or less than others; but God will be very pleased with the ones who make the fullest use of their talents. The bad children, the ones who do not make maximum use of their talents displease God, and bad things will eventually happen to them. He reports that at the age of nine he found her theology to be absolutely persuasive. Even now, many years later, he says, "I find that whenever I am in a class, ...Mrs. Downing's simple creed drives my emotions, if not my intellect." (Jim Stamper)

This line of interpretation makes a lot of sense, yet it leaves me uneasy, for surely there is more here than a simple moral tale encouraging us to try harder. Surely Jesus intended something more profound than glorifying a system that rewards venture capital! Jesus' stories are seldom platitudinous little tales meant to keep the world aright; they more often than not turn it upside down! There is more than "folksy" story-telling going on here!

We are also a little too quick to read things into this parable that aren't necessarily there. We assume that the two wealth producers took a great risk, but the text says nothing about risk. We have no idea how the two doubled their master's money. The text only says that they "traded" with the talents they were given. (25:16) Was it fair trade? We don't know. Someone has suggested that in antiquity the highest legal interest rate was about twelve percent; anything higher was considered rapacious. (Richard Rohrbaugh, "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents") The text tells us that the master was gone for a "long time" (25:19), but even with a return of twelve percent, he would have had to be gone six to seven years to get back double his funds! It may very well be that the trading in question was ethically questionable! The first two slaves, in fact, may not have been wealth producers, but wealth-takers!

Is the Hoarder the Hero?

If I am hesitant to crown the first two slaves as the heroes of Jesus' parable, is it even reasonable to entertain the notion that the third slave--the hoarder, if you like--is the hero? The story itself seems to indicate that economically, at least, the third slave was "a few fries short of a Happy Meal". He appears by all respects to be a loser. His venture capital accrued nothing, not even interest. He also seems to be a bit of a whiner. When he was called to account, he said, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." (25:24-25)

The third slave may be a bit of a loser and a whiner, yet he seems a somewhat sympathetic character, especially when the punishment meted out to him is so harsh. And in fairness to him, he actually did the correct, legal thing with the wealth entrusted to him. Under the rabbinic law of Jesus' day, burying wealth was regarded as the best security against theft. Anyone who did so was freed from any liability for its loss. Burying treasure was a common thing to do. Archeologists have dug up several treasure troves in the region. The law encouraged it.

Perhaps the third slave was more sensible than we would like to think. Perhaps the double-your-money scam skews our perception. The master chastised him for not even earning interest on the money, but it's a curious criticism, given that in Jewish culture charging interest, even as little as one percent, was a violation of the law. Injunctions against usury are common in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 23:19, for example, reads, "You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent." The poor in particular are not to be charged interest. Exodus 22:25 reads, "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them."

Was the third slave a fiscal coward or a hero? Some consider him the hero, pointing out, additionally, that in the ancient Mediterranean culture not making mistakes was more valued than excellence or success. It's better to do a mediocre job without making errors than risking shameful failure. Mistakes frequently result in dishonour, a loss of face. Also, the ideal in traditional Mediterranean society was stability, not self-advancement. Anyone trying to accumulate inordinate wealth imperiled the equilibrium of society and was thus understood to be dishonourable. Greed was widely believed to characterize the rich, who extorted and defrauded other members of the community through lucrative trading, tax collecting, and lending money at interest. In fact, usury was understood in antiquity to be responsible for the destructive cycle of indebtedness and poverty. (Bruce Malina, *Windows on the World of Jesus and The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*)

Such a reading of this parable is more amenable to some, for in their eyes the first reading seems to promote ruthless business practices (25:20), usury (25:27), and the cynical view that the rich will only get richer while the poor become destitute (25:29), and that somehow this is blessed behaviour in the eternal scheme of things! ("Towering Trees and 'Talented' Slaves," *The Other Side*) This is a mis-reading of Jesus' parable, they contend. The vast sums of money in the story would have prompted Jesus' listeners immediately to think of someone like Herod or some wealthy and powerful Roman patriarch, and since the elite financial dealings alluded to were far beyond the pale of the average person listening to Jesus, they would have been much quicker to identify with the third slave.

There is also something in the literary rhythm of this story to reinforce the idea of the third slave--the hoarder--as hero. Two slaves do the same thing, and then, like a good three-part joke, we come to the punch line. The third slave also does the surprising thing, and often in Jesus' parables it's the surprise that identifies the punch line. That the third slave buried the money in the ground seems strange at first glance, but considering that many in Jesus' audience were farmers, Jesus may well be using some wry peasant humour here. Unlike seeds, coins, when buried in the ground produce no fruit! Money cannot grow the natural way like seed, only unnaturally, through usury and swindling. It may be that this symbolic act of "planting" the talent is a case of prophetic tricksterism to reveal that money is not fertile. Such a view is in line with the view of prophets like Amos and Isaiah, who condemned those who "join house to house and add field to field, until there is room for no one but (the joiners and adders)..." (Isaiah 5:8)

This second stream of interpretation sees in Jesus' parable a clash between two economic world views: the traditional agrarian notion of "use-value" and the elite's currency-based system of "exchange-value". To read this parable as a divine endorsement of mercenary economics and the inevitable polarization of wealth is to miss

the point, they say. It simply reveals our complicity in the prevailing economic system, in which some amass obscene amounts of money, far out of proportion to their effort, while others grow increasingly destitute and desperate.

Is this line of interpretation justified? It's a bit of a relief from the moralizing approach, and it has much to say for itself, but it's not without problems. Is it telling us that "good" people will always bury money entrusted to them? Is it idealizing caution? Is it saying that the first century Palestinian peasant view of reality is the true construction of reality?

Conclusion

If I had more time, I'd like to develop these two lines of interpretation in greater depth, as well as the pros and cons of considering the master in the story as the story's hero, but I'd like to leave you with a little more than my own puzzlement.

The second line of interpretation may not be the correct one, but I think it's instructive to read the Scriptures through more than one set of lenses. Comparing at least two interpretations increases the possibility of unmasking our own suppositions. For example, risks, and taking them, should not be considered, by definition, good. We seldom laud risk-takers who fail. Similarly, caution should not be considered the most prudent move in all situations. Inevitably, life is a series of opportunities to discern when it's prudent to take a risk, and when it's risky to be cautious.

Perhaps the call to discernment in all matters, including economic ones, goes back to the first line of the parable, to the idea of trust. I have some difficulty picturing God in the harsh terms in which the parable's master is portrayed, but perhaps Jesus used such a character to get his listeners' attention and to impress upon them that in the ultimate scheme of things there will be a settling of accounts. This parable is one of a series of parables conveying similar warnings, though in next week's parable it is not the ones who "double their money" who receive a reward, it is those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. (Matthew 25:31-46)

God has entrusted us with things of great value, including money. As we discern the wisest use of these riches, may all that we do with what has been entrusted to us be done in order to please God, so that one day we too will hear the commendation, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Master."

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.