

**“Risking the Master’s Assets for the Kingdom’s Sake”
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Today is sometimes known, because of the collect for the day, as “Bible Sunday.” It offers the preacher an opportunity, should she decide to exploit it, to reflect upon the centrality and importance of scripture. For the years of my ministry experience the topic of how we read and interpret scripture has been a controversial one indeed, and it will continue to be.

But behind all the familiar controversy is an even more basic question, because how we read and regard the Bible has to do with how we regard God. If God exists, then how does that existence relate to us. Assuming that it does relate to us—that is that God is not as someone has recently suggested in a book title that borrows from the classic deist formula, a “the Blind Watchmaker”—then what can we expect from that relationship. Everything depends on this.

The gods of the Greeks and Romans were capricious, jealous, vindictive and cruel. The gods of the Aztecs were bloodthirsty, living off of the sacrifices of their subjects. Yaweh, the God of Israel, is different. He is characterized by justice and loving kindness, by mercy and loyalty. Of course we learn about this in the Bible; but the Bible was written by those whose forebearers experienced God’s faithfulness and mercy in their Exodus from Egypt and entry into the Promised Land. Likewise the New Testament paints a God of grace and mercy and forgiveness. But the painters were close enough to the experience of the Resurrection and Pentecost to be able to remember and to call us to continue to remember in the Eucharist the loving self-giving character of God.

But if the false gods of other peoples did not really exist, as we monotheists claim, then their worshipers must have been deluded, must have had some part in their creation, must have projected them into existence. Which is to say that we have a great capacity to erroneously convince ourselves, and apparently whole civilizations, of a character of God that is nefarious. And yet how we behave has everything to do with what we believe about the character of the God we claim. [That’s the issue we been talking about this season, hypocrisy, the way in which we believe the God we claim by behaving as if that God didn’t exist or had no claim on us, or as if that God were stingy and didn’t want to give us what we need and want, didn’t want us to be safe and secure, successful.] And so claiming a God of love and abundance, we approach life with anxiety and fear and with a clenched hand that ultimately ends up making a fist.

This, it seems to me, is also what Jesus confronts in his ministry and why he tells this parable. The God he comes to make known, to represent, to embody, is a God of abundant love. He is a God of truth and justice but whose judgment is always displayed in generosity, mercy and forgiveness. Jesus didn’t come to prove by the resurrection that God exists but rather to show us what kind of God he is. This God is consistent throughout the scripture: “he will meet your all needs through his riches in glory,” “he has abundantly blessed us with every spiritual gift.” But humans then and now have preferred to fear God and attribute to God anger and wrath before anything else. It is of

course easy enough to find passages like today's parable that at least appear to present the God of Israel in such a light. Consider a verse of the psalm appointed for today: "Who regards the power of your wrath? *who rightly fears your indignation?"

Given our propensity to binge on violence in the movies, and of our politicians to manipulate our fears of all kinds, there is no surprise that we would tend to regard God simply as one more thing to fear and be protected from. Jesus encountered such a similar reaction that it seems to suggest fear is hard-wired in us humans. His disciples over and over again, rather than exercise faith themselves turned to him. Even though he blessed them and commissioned them to go out to heal and preach good news to the poor, they continued to seek a sign that he was the messiah who would take care of them. In spite of his incessant proclamation that the Kingdom of God is "at hand," they persisted in their comfortable oppression, in seeing their "cup as half empty." The cultural oppression of scarcity and fear are precisely what today's parable addresses.

Jesus' hearers would have been familiar enough with the reaction of the third slave to being entrusted with the assets of the master. There was an agrarian economy where even the law seemed to be suspicious of investment with its condemnation of lending at interest. The average peasant did not look kindly on wealthy people who multiplied their wealth 'without sowing,' i.e., without honest labor. But the parable is not so much about economics as it is about faith. We might say it presents an economics of faith, an economics of true wealth. Every breath is a gift from God—every moment, every touch of another. Every opportunity to grow, to participate in the market forces of life and prosper is a trust from God. It is a talent, an asset, the wealthy master entrusts to us. The purpose of the parable is to transform the imagination of the hearers about who God is and how we relate to life.

"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." How many of us are afflicted with this kind of paralysis? How often do we hang on the edge of the pool shivering in fear that God will abandon us and we will sink in the waters of life. I remember my friend Bill from another parish who when asked to talk about stewardship one year, told the story about how his father had stood in the water and promised to catch him as a little boy when he pushed away. But the way Bill remembered it he didn't catch him. No doubt some of us, like Bill, have been hurt, have had our trust betrayed and need healing. But healing only comes by risking, in a caring community like this one, by risking openness and trust. It only comes by pushing away from the side and feeling the buoyancy, exhilaration, and joy of floating.

The third slave's fear of the judgment of the master has become his judgment on the master. This point is made even more clearly in Luke's version of this same parable. There the master replies to the third slave's words, "I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man." with, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew I was a harsh man, did you . . ." And then he gives his one talent to the one who made ten. The bystanders are aghast. "But he has ten!" they exclaim. And then the ruler says, "I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even

what they have will be taken away.” He is judged by his own judgment. It is his imagination of the master that determines his behavior and ultimately comes back to him as the master’s judgment on him. If we can imagine our master as free, audacious, generous, then we will take risks. And we will enter into a fruitful partnership and stewardship of his assets that is ever richer and more abundantly creative. If, on the other hand, we are bound by a supposed hardness of the master, then we will live as a function of that binding of the imagination, and we’ll remain bound, hand and foot, in a continuous, and possibly eternal, frustration.

Jesus’ purpose in telling this parable is to shock. It is to break the trance of fear, violence, and death, by which the god of this world has bound our imaginations. He shocks his hearers in order to bring about a conversion from a hard-hearted god to the God he calls “Abba,” “Father,” the God who is gracious and generous. He brings about in his hearers—in us—by means of the parable, a crisis that demands a choice. We must choose between one master and another. Which one will you serve: the true God or money, the God of love or of hate, the God of justice and peace or the god of security.

The church is not only the place where the true God, the God of Jesus, is proclaimed and worshipped. It is also a laboratory for generous, risky, Kingdom living. I like to say that we are learning and practicing the dance steps of kingdom of heaven, and we are called to risk the assets the master has entrusted to us by inviting to world to join us. I see this all over at St. Stephen’s as people partner with one another to bring life to the world. The wonderful Art Angels’ Festival so graciously invited by Ginny Doyle and Pam Martori and so many others not only welcomes the community into our house but also reflects or models an imagination of a God who is lavishly, prodigally creative, and appreciative of the gifts of all his people. It makes the point that all of us are called to risk owning our identity and called as artists. Or the myriad of programs to bring a warm lovingly prepared meal to a hungry neighbor, or bring dignity and self-respect to the needy by helping them to help others. We show a God who is generous and loving, and we, by risking, investing and spending the gifts God has blessed us with, we share that God with others, thereby entering into the Joy of our Master.

Now finally, if I may, I want to return to the designation of this Sunday as Bible Sunday, and in conclusion make the point that the Bible will reflect back to the reader the God she seeks to find there or is convinced he won’t find there. You can find the hard-hearted God of the third slave in the parable if that’s who you are looking for; you can also find the true God, the God of Jesus Christ, revealed there. Many people give up on the Bible because it seems so scandalous, bloody, and because the God they find there seems so harsh. But don’t worry. Don’t give up. Ask the loving God, the God of Jesus Christ, the God you know from your life in Christ here at St. Stephen’s to reveal himself in its pages. And be patient and seek the comfort of a community of readers, because it takes a lot of time to transform our imagination, stuck as it is on the harsh, judgmental God. But as the promise of the Collect for today—at least in its Rite I version—has it, we pray that “by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou hast given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.”