

November 19, 2017 – The Hero Unmasked

Matthew 25:14-30

Claire just read a classic story, a parable that has been told and interpreted for over two thousand years. No doubt you have heard a minister preach on this story in the past. So tell me, what is it about? (*wait for answer – could be kingdom of God, use our gifts, don't be lazy, etc.*)

Often Jesus' parables are seen as allegories where the characters actually represent other people or things. Who or what does the landowner represent in this story? (*answer could be God or Jesus*). Who do the workers represent? (*answer may be the church, the disciples, you and I, followers of Jesus*) And what about, the money that the landowner gave his workers, what does it represent? (*gifts of the Spirit, God's gifts to us, our wealth*) So the classic interpretation of this parable is that the third worker is at fault. The third worker messes up because he is too scared to invest his money or his talent. The heroes of the story are the first two workers because they are willing to risk their money and/or their gifts in God's service. Have I got it right?

That's a really important message. You all seem to understand it... so I guess we're finished then.....right? We're ready to go off to the game. But wait minute... does anyone have anything they want to add.... any words of wisdom.....maybe a story or two to illustrate the message? There are lots of stories about using our gifts wisely.

OK, don't panic, it was a busy week, but I haven't lost my mind. I don't really expect you to fill in the rest of the message. And for those of you were getting excited about the possibility of leaving early, no the sermon is not over.

I want to offer you another way of looking at this parable. When I was in seminary, I took a course called the *Politics of Jesus* and in that course I was introduced to a biblical scholar named William Herzog. He wrote a book called, "Parables as Subversive Speech." In his book, Herzog suggests that we look at this parable as it written. He suggests that we try to understand it as it would have been understood by the peasants that Jesus was talking to back in first century Palestine. So let's forget the whole allegory thing and look at this parable as it was told, in the context in which it was told.

First of all, wealthy landowners in first century Palestine often went on long journeys in order to find new business opportunities. Just like the president of Potash Corp would head overseas to develop new markets in Asia or Africa. Of course in those days there were no planes or even trains so travel was more difficult and journeys took a much longer time.

So while the landowner was away he needed to entrust some of his wealth to his staff. The workers in this story would have been middle managers, people with some power; but who were still dependent on the landowner for their salaries. In today's passage we read that the workers were given a specific amount of money, "according to each one's ability." Herzog explains that the original Greek could just as easily be translated "according to each one's power," where power

indicates rank or status. So the worker who received the most talents was probably the one with the highest ranking in the household, the one with the most power

So how did those first two workers double their wealth? It says in the story, that they “invested” their money. The elites, or the rich people, in first century Palestine often increased their wealth by making loans. They would make loans to peasant farmers so they could plant their crops or to local artisans so they could buy material for their crafts. The interest rates were very high for these loans – sometimes as high as 60 or even 200 percent. The rich would make a large profit on the interest and, when the crops were poor, they would often end up foreclosing on the land that had been used as collateral for the loan. Those two workers would have doubled their money on the backs of the poor.

So what did those first two workers have to gain besides, of course, pleasing the landowner with their efforts? Well as it turns out, it was quite acceptable for them to keep some of the profit for themselves, as long as they also made a good return (as least double) for their boss. There’s good reason why the first two workers “immediately” begin investing their money. There were personal riches to be gained.

What about the third worker? He is clearly the focus of the parable. In the story, he receives as much attention as the other two combined when the landowner returns. The third worker chooses to bury his one thousand dollars in the ground. He wants to be sure that it will still be there when his landowner returns.

He explains his actions by saying, “Knowing your ruthlessness – you who reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter – and fearing your wrath, I went off and buried your one thousand dollars in the ground. Here is your money back.”

Can you imagine the reaction when Jesus said that line to the peasant farmers who were listening? Can you hear their gasps of surprise? This worker had the audacity to tell the truth, to name the rich landowner for what he was: a scavenger, a thief, ruthless, merciless, and cruel.

The amazing part of this story is that the landowner does not deny the truth of what the third worker says. He responds, “So you know that I reap where I don’t sow and gather where I don’t scatter, do you?” In fact the landowner probably sees exploitation of the poor and extravagant living as honourable. Everyone else does it ... so why not him?

But this third worker has dared to speak the truth out loud, in front of the other workers. By burying the talent and not using it to exploit the poor, he felt free to speak the truth. We would call this third worker a “whistle-blower.” He is like the lowly clerk who dares to tell the CEO that his supervisor is stealing from the company, or the safety inspector who won’t accept a bribe and raises a flag so airplanes will be properly maintained or the government employee that tells the media about infrastructure projects that have cost way too much.

But what happens to the whistle-blower? Having spoken the truth, the third worker is shamed and humiliated so that his words will carry no weight. He is labelled “worthless” and “lazy”, a “lout” and “a bum” so that he will be stigmatized and no one will listen to him.

But the peasants who are hearing this story identify with that third worker. They understand his actions. He buried that talent so it could not be used as a tool of oppression, as a way of stealing their meagre resources, their land. This third worker has spoken their truth, the truth that they are frightened to utter out loud. The third worker has chosen a path of honour even knowing that he would pay the price. This worker becomes the peasant’s hero.

Through this parable Jesus has shown the peasants that he understands their world, their plight, their oppression. Their truth is there at the end of the story when the landowner says, “Those who have will get more until they grow rich, while those who have not will lose even the little they have.” The peasants recognize the truth of their existence. Through this parable Jesus has gained their trust. They begin to realize that Jesus is there to give them hope. They know that when truth is spoken to power, God’s justice is possible.

So which worker are you? Which worker do you want to be?