

November 13, 2011
Proper 28, A
Matthew 25:14-30

Isn't it the most amazing coincidence that on the week when we bring an end to our fall Stewardship campaign, Sustaining the Heartbeat, the lectionary just happens to present us with the parable of the slaves and the talents from Matthew's gospel. When I first noticed that coincidence months ago, in my advance planning for worship services this fall I sort of chuckled. "Aha" I thought to myself, "that's going to be one easy sermon to write!" I could see the broad strokes of it right there and then at the planning table – savvy servants get talents, invest wisely, increase returns, enter into the joy of their master equals savvy congregation sharing their financial resources with FSA, which does good in the world, and all enter into the joy of the master. How good is that? As my minister-friends and I say to each other when we are comparing notes half-way through the week: that'll preach.

Except. Except – if you slow the parade down a little bit, quiet the drums and shush the trumpets – if you look at the text carefully, and pay attention to that little voice in the back of your mind that whispers, "there's something wrong here" it doesn't hang together quite as nicely as one might hope.

Maybe you felt it, too – that little twinge in your gut that says, "ouch... excuse me, did Jesus really say that?" For me it happens around about v. 24. Up until then it's just a splendid spectacle, an exuberant cymbal-banging, trombone-blaring procession. A man goes on a journey, and gives his slaves some talents, and they wheel and deal and invest and play the markets and get fabulous returns: 100%! I'd take less than half that – wouldn't you? And the master comes home, and he pats them on the back and bids them to enter into his joy – absolutely marvelous. It's all just ducky.

Until v. 24. THEN THE ONE WHO HAD RECEIVED THE ONE TALENT ALSO CAME FORWARD, SAYING, "MASTER, I KNEW THAT YOU WERE A HARSH MAN... a harsh man? Harsh? I have been assuming that the master was standing in for God in this parable, and that I was somehow in the place of the slaves... but is God harsh?

A HARSH MAN, REAPING WHERE YOU DID NOT SOW, AND GATHERING WHERE YOU DID NOT SCATTER SEED... this does not sound like God at all – or maybe like some twisted, perverted mis-interpretation of God being vengeful... but not the God that Jesus came to reveal to us, a God of love and mercy and infinite, infinite compassion towards each one of us.

The servant goes on: SO I WAS AFRAID, AND I WENT AND HID YOUR TALENT IN THE GROUND. HERE YOU HAVE WHAT IS YOURS.' You can just see him, trembling in his boots, holding out the one talent, hoping not to get hit. Like a little child, trembling before an abusive parent; like a vulnerable partner, cowering before a violent spouse.... is this us standing before God? with our tiny hands outstretched, and our faces turned away, ready to run from an unpredictable but powerful bully?

No! That's where my gut jumped up and said – something's wrong here. This just doesn't feel right. We need to untangle this parable a little bit – to dig into the difficulty of this - and the broad strokes of that far-too-easy stewardship sermon just turned into smoke and blew away. It wouldn't preach after all. Darn!

All the commentators I read wanted to try and exonerate the master – to explain why he was justified in punishing the poor slave who buried the treasure in the ground out of fear. The master says: **AS FOR THIS WORTHLESS SLAVE, THROW HIM INTO THE OUTER DARKNESS, WHERE THERE WILL BE WEeping AND GNASHING OF TEETH.** The commentators fooled around with the idea that maybe the slave deserved what he had coming to him – because he was afraid. He should have had more courage. And some of them wondered whether the master wasn't really a bad guy, but that the slave's perceptions of him as a bad guy called out that kind of bad-guy-behaviour at the end of the parable.

I call that blame-the-victim. It's the slave's own fault that he gets treated that way. But the reason the commentators felt that they had to absolve the master and blame the slave for the master's vicious behaviour, I think, is that they all stuck to the traditional interpretation of the characters, where the master stands in for God. They were all trying to protect God from the appearance of being vicious and arbitrary. I wonder whether they all bent over backwards to protect God in this way because in the backs of our minds we all sort of wonder whether God isn't vicious and arbitrary. After all, bad things happen to good people. Good Christian workers get cancer; young yoga-instructing mothers get hit by cars and die; kind, wonderful, faithful people lose their jobs, their marriages, their life-savings. Maybe, a little voice says to us all by times, maybe that's God doing that....

Who hasn't heard a voice in their head saying: **YOU WICKED AND LAZY SLAVE! ... TO ALL THOSE WHO HAVE, MORE WILL BE GIVEN, AND THEY WILL HAVE AN ABUNDANCE; BUT FROM THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING, EVEN WHAT THEY HAVE WILL BE TAKEN AWAY.** Maybe I deserve this suffering after all. God is punishing me.

I hate that voice. And I am sure that God hates that voice, too. It is the voice that kills hope. It is the voice that beckons despair. It is the voice that isolates us from the ever-present love of God... and so it cannot be God's voice, can it? When would God ever say to you, to me, to anyone, **YOU WICKED AND LAZY SLAVE?**

No. God calls us children – more than that: heirs – no, more than that: joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Not wicked, but beloved. Not lazy but beloved – you are my beloved child....

OK – let's try something else on for size. What if the master in this parable isn't God? I'm not saying I'm right – maybe I'm wrong – but try this on for size. Let's just let the master be a master – a regular, human master. And let's take the trembling slave's word on his character, which the master actually confirms: **BUT HIS MASTER REPLIED, YOU WICKED AND LAZY SLAVE! YOU KNEW, DID YOU, THAT I REAP WHERE I DID NOT SOW, AND GATHER WHERE I DID NOT SCATTER?** The master admits that he's dishonest. He's not God at all – he's the market-place, he's capitalism, he's a bankrupt financial system where over-

paid banking executives can destroy the mortgage market and the global economy and still get their multi-million dollar severance payouts. The master is greed.

So who are the servants? Two of them try to play the game – and they play it pretty well. They are those of us who have survived the volatile ups and downs of investments and careers and expenses and have somehow managed to hold on to our jobs, our houses, our children's educations... we might just make it.

But the one servant just says, no. No. I won't play that game. I won't participate in something that can destroy others. I won't prop up a master who has no ethics. I won't be part of the system because the system is inhuman.

And that servant is prepared to suffer for others. That servant is prepared to be flung into the outer darkness rather than to collude with empire. That servant knows the power of what is buried in the ground – of what dies, so that others might have life. Maybe that servant is Jesus, whose crucifixion was his eloquent 'no' to the powers of this world. His death gave us a different way to triumph over evil – a way of suffering that is still hard to understand, but which is, in the end, the only way to real life.

And if we are being faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, here at First-St. Andrew's United Church, if we are truly living our faith and putting it into action in as many ways as we can imagine, if we are teaching our children to turn the other cheek, and strengthening our youth to walk the extra mile, and encouraging each other to give not only our coat but also our cloak when our neighbour is in need, if we are doing it to the least of our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we are like that suffering servant standing up to the wicked masters of the world.

And this community becomes a beacon, this community becomes a source of light in the darkness, this community becomes a taste of salt in the stew of the world, this community becomes a grain of yeast in the loaf of humanity. We need this community, and we need to support this community financially, spiritually, with time and with talent, so that this community will be here into the future, not just to strengthen us in our lives, but also to stand firm against the masters of darkness and to say to them, 'no!' That's what Jesus did, that's what his followers down through the generations have done, and that's what we are committed to doing, because we are the children and heirs of God in this place.

And that will preach!

(A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St Andrew's United Church, London, Ont.
www.fsaunited.com)