

Sermon for Stewardship Sunday, November 13, 2011
Congregational United Church of Christ of Arlington Heights
"THAT'S THE POINT" (based on Matthew 25: 14-30)
Rev. Rex Piercy

Each Week I read Larry Greenfield's on-line offering called "Thinking Theologically" which appears on the website of Chicago's Protestants for the Common Good organization. He entitled this week's ponderings: "Scattering and Sowing." When I read his opening paragraph, I quietly said "Amen" to my computer screen. This is what he wrote:

"Some portions of scripture tempt me to abandon my Christian faith and go on the lookout for another religious tradition that more unambiguously represents what I understand to be the truth and efficacy about the God proclaimed and demons rated by Jesus of Nazareth."

What Greenfield means is that the Bible often contains texts which seem to tolerate, even promote, violence and injustice and demonstrate a pronounced inequality and the violation of basic human rights, limiting God's love and care to only some, while condemning the rest to exclusion, suffering, and damnation now and forever.

Then Greenfield approached today's parable from the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel. And he said: "What a shock then when I learn that a text which I'm quite confident could never pass the test of being anywhere near the authentic words of Jesus is found, by the most critical of scholars, to be pretty close to what Jesus probably said."

So, like Greenfield, I too am left with the dilemma of my commitment to having scripture be a primary source of divine revelation and stories like this one which in my mind seem clearly not to be, but are.

Not too long ago you may recall we explored some of the parables of Jesus in our worship. And we discovered that all the parables, even the familiar ones, have their challenges. But perhaps no three parables present more challenges than do the three which are told end to end in the 25th chapter of Matthew, told by Jesus, as his coming death cast a shadow over the final week of his life. They are, in order, the one we read last week about the five foolish bridesmaids who

weren't prepared for the bridegroom's delayed arrival; this one we read today about servants giving an accounting to their master; and next week's one about the last judgment. As I said, all of these were told by Jesus as he nears death. And they are particularly challenging and easily lend themselves to "incorrect" and wild interpretations. So, what's the point of this story today, this one about talents and all?

Well, sometimes we interpret the tale to be about "talents" in the sense of personal gifts and abilities that God expects us to use well. Perhaps this is so because this parable often appears in the lectionary this time of the year, just as churches like ours are observing their annual stewardship time. In fact, did you know that the word "talent" which was a unit of money in the ancient world came into the English language from this very parable, because of just this interpretation? Use our talents, we say, and good things will happen, including amazing growth (in us, as well as the Reign of God). Bury your talents, leave them unexercised, and we end up out in the cold. With a reading like that, the parable is all about things like responsibility and

accountability: putting our resources and our talents to use wisely.

But that's not the point.

Neither is the point of this parable about wise investing of our money, as if this were some lesson on capitalism from Adam Smith, this in spite of the fact that a "talent" was in fact a unit of currency in Jesus' day.

This parable is not about money.

That's not the point.

SO what is the point?

Well, to answer that, it helps to read this parable with the other two in Matthew chapter 25, and to read all of them in light of where Jesus is on his journey. He is on his way to the cross; it is his final week, and he is preparing to leave his disciples, knowing that there may be a long "meantime" until he comes again. Remember, Jesus said even he didn't know the day or the hour for that, only God in heaven knows.

The other thing to keep in mind as we decipher what the point of this and its companion parables may be is to recognize that sometimes in the Gospels there are passages where Jesus speaks with great love and reassurance when leaving his disciples.

They – and we – love to hear him say, “Do not fear.”

But this is not one of those places; this is not one of those passages. Here, instead of love and reassurance, and a gentle “Fear Not,” Jesus speaks a word of challenge and warning. It’s the old paradox – words of grace and words of justice. This parable about servants and talents or money and an accounting to a master, along with its two companions, are about the justice thing, the consequences thing. This is not the prodigal son and gifts and parties. This is cause and effect, plain and simple. This is what Paul meant when we wrote that we reap what we sow. This is a story about talents, and enterprising or lazy servants, and an anticipated day of reckoning when the One we await returns, whenever that may be. This is Jesus leaving his parting instructions. This is Jesus on faithfulness, preparedness, and risk. You see, if oil was the image in last week’s passage, and sheep and goats are the vehicle in next week’s, then in this parable money is used. But remember, money isn’t the point.

In all of Jesus’ parables, this one included, he is always whimsical. You see none of the characters in his

parables are historical figures. They are creatures of his imagination. They are caricatures, foils for you and me, showing us our own potential for folly or faith.

So what’s the point? The cowardly lion of Oz fame speaks the answer. It’s all about courage. The whole point, the entire lesson we can learn from a story about money and loans, is courage – about using everything God has given us – not just our money, not just our talents and abilities – but everything you have, everything you are and aspire to be – and using it all in God’s full and complete service. After all, you can’t serve two masters, Jesus told us, when one of those masters is God and the other is anything else, including our money.

What God has given to us – ourselves, our lives, our faith, our abilities, our gifts, and our possessions – all of it is given to us not to be hoarded, but to be put into circulation. There are no safety deposit boxes when it comes to God’s gifts. And to do that takes courage. It requires risk. Our lives are to be expanded, invested, in God’s service, and nothing takes more courage. All that God gives us is given to be risked in new ventures in God’s

service. Every new step in living for God is a risk!

When the roll is called up yonder by and by, be that soon and very soon or somewhere down the road so far we can't even imagine it, we will be called for an accounting. And the question won't be: "Well, did you preserve the balance sheet?" No, the question will be: "What audacious, crazy, risk-taking action did you do with your life and your gifts for the sake of the Reign of God?" Did we live in the confidence that God is good all the time, all the time God is good, or did we run and hide under the bed quivering in fear lest the God of Hosts, the Lord of Creation, might ask for an accounting and we want to be sure to give back exactly what God gave?

What's the point? The point is – living courageously "in the meantime" is what it's all about when you sign on with Jesus until her returns. Yes, good stewardship of our time, talent and treasure matters, it surely does; but what really, really, really matters is taking the risk of a transformed life as individuals and as a church.

These three parables in Matthew 25 are about risk-taking in Christ's name as an expression of the Gospel. They invite us to see that faith is something

very different from keeping our religion tucked away in a secure location where it serves only us in some cocoon of comfort. Faith is to be expended, let loose in the world. This is what stewardship really means. And as you can see stewardship includes money and time and talents but goes a long way beyond that. Ours is a stewardship of the very Gospel itself!

We can bury our faith, our relationship with God and the gospel itself, tucking it away in some hidden place and just take it out on Sundays and in emergencies; or, we can use our whole lives – affected, changed, and transformed by the Gospel – 24/7/365 at the beck and call of the Still-speaking God, even when it means standing up against, challenging, and yes, bringing down those who try to gain the whole world and lose their own souls.

Safety, reassurance, security vs. courage, openness, and risk-taking. That's the point. Maybe we need a pledge card for that!