

Sermon Notes

Loving The Dangerous Neighbor

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

The Reverend Mark Pruitt

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, "It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, '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.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, '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.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, '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. Here you have what is yours.' 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? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

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We are continuing to think together about the second great commandment: Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself. We've considered in previous weeks how to love the *difficult* neighbor; how to love the *wounded* neighbor; how to be *vigilant* or watchful in loving our neighbors; and how to love neighbors *far away* or close to home. Next week our guest preacher, Tom Furrer, will talk about loving our *needy* neighbor. He's the guy for this! He's devoting his retirement to missions in Africa. He's taken people from here to a medical mission in Nigeria. He knows about human needs, and he works under the gospel imperatives to feed, or fix stomachs, and to feed souls. I hope we're all eager to learn from him in what he says from the pulpit and in the adult education forum. That's next week.

Today, our focus is loving our *dangerous* neighbor. It will take some work on my part to get from the gospel lesson to this topic. We've just heard the well-known parable of the talents. It doesn't seem related to the theme, "loving our dangerous neighbor." But I think I can make the connection. I can do it best with a blunt claim about that well-known parable. Being blunt doesn't come easy for all of us. But here is the blunt claim. It is this: Jesus crafted a parable in which the dramatic moment in the parable is when the curtain is pulled back on the heart of the slothful servant. He explains why he played it so safe, why he dug a hole and carefully buried the talent entrusted to him. He was afraid. He was afraid he might lose the talent. And he was afraid especially because the master who entrusted the talent to him was a tough man, a drill-sergeant type of guy, someone you didn't want to get on the wrong side of, someone who could wring blood out of a stone—the kind of guy who would be very upset, maybe even violent. We can almost hear a quivering in the third servant's explanation of why he played it so safe.

So in this parable, we have a contrast between two servants who live with an active, confident trust in the opportunities, the talents, the time and gifts that God has given them and a servant who fearfully shrinks back from life. The first two move out into life and the second chooses not to use what he has been given, but to put it into storage. He chooses to bury and put deep in the ground what God has given him.

Have you seen this contrast in life? It's a contrast between living fully, making the most of what one is been given (yes, even if some others even have more) and wasting what we've been given (maybe *because* it looks meager.) Have you seen this contrast in *your* life? Do you tend toward one side or the other...setting forth, bursting out of the starting blocks or shrinking back, not really running the race? Do you play the game of life with joyful abandon or remain on the sidelines in fear of making a mistake?

These are the questions that the living God, through the Scriptures, is posing to you and to me. The gospel, you know, isn't just about the forgiveness of our sins, wonderful as that is. It isn't just about God's mercy, astonishing as that is. It's just about an eternal life with God, hope-producing as that is. Christ also exposes the fears and evasions of the human heart. He's like a Great Physician, who means business. Christ, through the Spirit, wants to breathe new life into us now for the sake of *this life*. It happened then, it happens now. The good news, in Palestine 2,000 years ago and in this place right now, is that a living Christ, like a physician, makes a diagnosis. He sees and brings to light with absolute truthfulness (that we may experience as ruthlessness)...he exposes our fears and evasions. He does this because he wants to liberate us from fear. He wants us to know that perfect love casts out fear (1 John.) And when I read that in my Bible, he doesn't saying anything about taking away just one fear, the fear of death. The Scriptures says fear, meaning fear in whatever form. Let that sink in. Let it sink in that he wants to save all the energy we use, like that old prophet Jonah, to evade our callings, and be set free.

Well, fear, holding back, looking away. These are the things that keep us from loving our dangerous neighbor, those to whom some stigma is attached, those with whom involvement might mean harm to our reputation, those whose needs might be so significant that the cost to us is high. We move away from this opportunity, like that fearful servant, or we will be tempted to.

In the early days of Christianity (and not just the early days) Christians stood by tending to the sick and dying when massive plagues and epidemics devastated urban centers. In [The Rise of Christianity](#), a book by sociologist/historian Rodney Stark, the author points out that the wealthy pagan aristocracy left the towns when hit with plagues. But the Christians remained. Unafraid of death, they cared for the so-called lost causes. As plagues wiped out up to 30% of some cities, the Christians didn't flee – and this was noticed. Looking at what others from the times said about Christians, Stark contends that this was a key factor in the rise of Christianity from a small Palestinian movement to the widely embraced faith it became in just a few centuries: Christians caring for the dangerous neighbor. Do you see that this is part of our heritage? This is how our forebears in faith lived! Liberated from fears, evasions, excuses, they bore a glowing witness to the love of God. They lived out something close in spirit to a little sticker I saw at the gym, and bought for myself. "Be Stronger Than Your Excuses." It helps me get into the cold water to swim in mornings when I am certain of one thing: I don't want to get into the cold water to swim! The gospel helps to make us stronger than our excuses. Than our *many* excuses.

And, Stark says more, the early Christians gave women an equal place in their movement. No, things had not progressed to where they are today for women. And Yes, Roman patriarchy set the women's movement back when Christianity was swallowed up in a way by Constantine. But in the earliest days, largely under the influence of Paul (and Jesus!), a radical egalitarianism stood out as a countercultural way of living: "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female," he wrote. And so this, too was making a dangerous move, breaking

down the walls of a class-system, a caste – kind of system *because* (am I being too repetitive?) Christ had *freed* them from fear, from evasions, to care with the healthy self-forgetfulness that comes with living in Christ.

Do you know what I mean by that? Can you turn to Christ – do you turn – when you find yourself becoming a bundle of cares, a stress-ball tightly wound, a fearful little mouse? The third servant in the parable, the anti-example, was a fearful little mouse. And yet he had the audacity to tell his master what his master was, hard and demanding. He squeaked out a quick self-justification, an excuse. And we can be that way, too! Filled with excuses and packing a theology that puts us in prison of paralysis.

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So I hope you can see how the heart of this parable—this dramatic moment of Jesus' judgment – has, really, everything to do with loving the dangerous neighbor. I know, of course, that there is virtually no chance that anyone of us has next door a terrorist cell, a crystal meth lab, or a leper colony. But if we adopt the view of neighbor as anyone who comes in to our sphere of life, whose need we can meet or relieve, then we will have an opportunity to love a dangerous neighbor.

The dangerous neighbor might be any of the following:

- A person with a bad reputation (whether deserved or not)
- A person with a criminal past
- A militant atheist who aggressively seeks to crush simple minded Christians
- A person whose coarse language pains our psyche
- A person who is constitutionally negative, or toxic
- A person who is never-endingly needy

These are each dangerous in some way. We could get hurt in some way by each of them. Our minds may flash warning signs that say: *Don't get involved. What will others think? I don't have the energy or the resources. I can't cope with this or that person, or those kinds of people. Or we might say, "I just don't have the time."*

Now, let's pause.

'We don't have the time.' Jesus had time. Jesus had time for prostitutes, tax collectors, and sinners. He touched the lepers and had time for them. His time was their time. He went to the outcast and the marginalized. No fear about his reputation for him when it came to whom he would heal or help.

What a wonderful way to think about the good news. God has time for me. God has time for you. There is not a care or concern of yours that God doesn't care about. There is not a plan or project you have that God doesn't have a plan for. There is not a longing or love in your life that God doesn't have wisdom to give you in shaping it. God has time for you.

The more we let this sink in, the more radiant will our witness be when we give our time to others. There is a world out there – people in your sphere of life and mine – of neighbors who don't know this one thing: God has time for them! And so their days go by, as they do, missing this massive one bug thing: God. There is something mission on their calendars: a day spent in the knowledge and love of God. They are unaccompanied minors, so to speak, and unaccompanied adults.

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Can we place to one side our fear of not getting done all the things on our to-do list? Can we have time for people in the way God has time for us? Can we remember that God is eager to be

interrupted by us calling on him, trusting him, crying out for wisdom and strength and much else? If so then we will be more willing, I trust, to accept the interruptions that come to us in the form of new neighbors with needs. (How about that for a bumper sticker: Interrupt me! I'm here to help.) And we will have to remember that what God commands, God empowers. Loving our neighbors – needy, wounded, dangerous, or whatever – is done “in Christ,” reliant on his example, his command, his power. We don't do it alone, on our own steam. It is God who makes us fruitful on the front lines. What we need to do is yield, die to self, be open, and keep in view the finish line – its joy and it's reality – with a God eager, really eager, to say, if it's true, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You took the opportunities I gave you to love your neighbors, wounded, needy, and even dangerous. Well done!”



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