

Mirror, Mirror on the Wall

Dr. Mike Wood Daly – November 19, 2023

MacNeill Baptist Church

This morning's Gospel is found in Matthew 25 verse 14-28. It falls in the middle of a collection of three parables, The parable of the bridesmaids, the parable of the talents, and the parable of the sheep and the goats.

In Chapter 24, Jesus begins with a description of the temple and its destruction, highlighting the kinds of things that will disrupt, undermine, and eventually destroy the kind of vision God holds for life on earth.

"Do you see all these things?" Jesus asks. "Truly I tell you, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."

From this warning, Jesus moves to a parable about ten bridesmaids, five of whom are wise and five who are foolish - and the relative benefits and consequences of being so.

Then he continues:

"It will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, ^[a] each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. ¹⁶ The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. ¹⁷ So also, the one with two bags of gold; he gained two more. ¹⁸ But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ "After a long time the master of those servants returned to settle his accounts. ²⁰ The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

²¹ “The master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²² “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

²³ “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

²⁴ “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I know that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

²⁶ “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! You knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ²⁷ Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned at least I would have received it back with interest.

²⁸ “‘Take the bag of gold from him’, the master said, “and give it to the one who has ten bags. ²⁹ For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. ³⁰ Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

It has been said that parables are mirrors to the soul. Mirrors allow us to see ourselves. They show us what we look like. They can reflect our self-expression and give us glimpses of our ancestry and heritage. Sometimes they show us parts of ourselves we’ve never seen before or appreciated and the beauty that is present in us.

But sometimes they can also show us who we are not. They can uncover our failings and flaws. They can reveal a darkness in us that we have not or are not willing to see.

Both can be difficult. Sometimes what we see is so difficult to accept or acknowledge that we close our eyes and refuse to see.

Let me share an example. One of the most famous mirrors in contemporary literature belongs to the evil queen in Walt Disney's interpretation of Snow White – "Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

How many of you remember that line?

Well, let me suggest that perhaps the greatest trick the evil queen ever pulled was providing us all with a false collective memory. Because in fact, that's not what she says at all. It's close ... but the real quote is "Magic Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all." How many times have we watched that movie ... or read that story ... and still we don't know that line correctly.

Even when we look in the mirror and are faced with the truest possible picture of ourselves, we sometimes find it hard to see the real story. It's hard to acknowledge, accept and act on the reality of what we see before us.

The famous French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur captures this tension when he suggests that metaphors or parables are intended to capture "what is" ***and*** "what is not". In the religious context they are sometimes meant to communicate what "God's reign is like" ***and*** "what it is not like."

Traditionally, the parable of the talents has been seen as a call or exhortation to Jesus' followers to use their God-given gifts in the service of God, and to take risks for the sake of the Kingdom of God. These gifts have often been seen to include our personal abilities or talents in the everyday sense, as well as our personal wealth. Using these gifts well brings God's favour. Using them poorly brings God's judgement.

But what if our parable is not a story of what the kingdom of God ***is like*** – but rather what ***is not like***.

Our first clue comes in the parable I mentioned that comes immediately before it. Chapter 25 begins with a story of ten bridesmaids. There is lots to unpack from that story on its own. But what is most important for us this morning is the way that story ends.

As we come to the parable's conclusion we discover a warning – keep watch! Jesus says. Or in today's vernacular – “watch out!” Throughout the scriptures those words are used as code. The author, through Jesus' words, is telling us to pay attention. “You are about to witness something out of the ordinary – you are about to hear something that will turn your world upside down.”

The first thing to watch out for is the way the parable of the talents begins. While many parables start with the phrase “The Kingdom of God” or “The Kingdom of Heaven” is like this - this parable does not. A more accurate common-day reading would be something like: “Let me tell you like it is...” There is a landholder, a corporate executive, a market baron with several people working under him ... he's about to take a trip ... and he wants some employees to cover for him while he's gone.

This is no small-time, mom and pop store business owner. The amounts being talked about here are so exorbitant as to border on hyperbole. A talent was one of the largest denominations one could imagine in the Hellenistic world. Some estimates suggest that in Jesus' day it would have been worth more than 15 years wages for the average worker. In today's economy that would translate to roughly about \$2.5 million dollars.

Right from the beginning there is something wrong ... something over the top about this story.

The servants are starting out with an enormous amount of money – and then the first two servants double it!

Rather than evoke admiration from Jesus' first century audience – these people would have been appalled. Disgusted. Richard Rohrbaugh, in his book, “A Peasant Reading of the Parable

of the Talents” reminds us that in First Century Israel, the highest legal interest rate was about 12%. Anything more would have been considered criminal.

Far from 12%, these servants have earned 100% on their investment. Something shady is going on here. Those listening to Jesus would have known all too well that the only way to double these investments in that amount of time would have been through the most predatory of means: like extortion, fraud, and lending money at illegal rates of interest.

In his book, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, Bruce Malina also suggests that the cultural ideal at that time wasn’t self advancement but stability. Anyone trying to accumulate massive amounts of wealth would have put the entire economy at risk. These servants wouldn’t have been admired. They would have been despised.

So, what’s happening here? We are beginning to see a parable that is reflecting back an economic and social system that is built off the backs of others. This isn’t the kingdom – this is life – real life – here and now. These two servants and their master aren’t heroes – they’re pirates.

So, if the story is meant to open our eyes to the profiteering, materialism and greed portrayed by the master and his first two servants, is it also possible that this frightened, noncooperating, and ineffective third servant might actually be the parable’s hero?

When the master returns to settle his accounts, what does he say to the first two? “Well done, good and faithful servant—enter into the joy of your master.”

We are used to reading this as meaning their receipt of God’s blessing – but listen carefully. The master still refers to them as servants. They’ve earned all this money, and they are still beholden to him. It is his joy that is celebrated. Not theirs. These two are enslaved in a system that funnels all its resources and all its joy towards a select group of individuals. In this story there is no blessing or freedom or joy for the wider community. That belongs only to the one at the top.

Finally, we come to the third servant and begin to see more clearly the clash between two economic worldviews. The master berates him because he hasn't participated in his game. He doesn't even seem concerned with the money he gave the servant in the first place. He's angry that the servant didn't make more. The only thing the master seems to appreciate is the appreciation of his money.

And with this realization the servant begins to speak truth to power. "I knew you were a harsh man" the servant says. The word Jesus uses in Greek is the same word used to describe the hard heartedness of the Pharaohs. "You reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter seed."

The servant becomes the "whistle blower," calling out the master for building his wealth off the backs of others. He profits from those who work the land. He uses unscrupulous ways of growing his money. And he invites others into his unjust schemes.

Unwilling to participate in this kind exploitation, the third servant takes his money out of circulation, where it could not be used to oppress anyone else. He buries it in the ground. And when it is time to be called to account, in one courageous and repudiant act he says "Here, take what is yours. I don't want any part of it" (25:25).

Note that the passage does not say he wasn't afraid ... in fact, the servant admits he was afraid the entire time!" He knows the master won't just be disappointed. He will be furious. And yet, the servant says it anyway.

Still, when the master hears this, he doesn't defend himself. He doesn't deny the whistle-blower's analysis of the master or his world. The master simply calls him evil and lazy.

Unsatisfied with the servant's response, the master makes an example of him, dispossessing him and giving the returned single talent to one of the other servants, illustrating that in this kind everyday world "to those who have, more will be given—and those who have not, everything will be taken away."

This story is not about God's kingdom. This is a story about what is. The parable of the talents in Matthew is a cautionary tale about a world controlled by a privileged few and those who are complicit with it. It is a world where those who live on the margins and refuse to be complicit are likely to find themselves drowning in an "outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30). It truly is a story of hell on earth.

And with that the parable ends.

But not the story. For in the same way that we are encouraged to preface the parable of the talents with the parable of the bridesmaids, we are challenged to conclude it with the parable of the sheep and the goats.

The whistle-blower's punishment banishes him to the edges of our dominant culture. It kicks him out of the rich man's system. And yet, as the next parable continues, we discover this is exactly where the one true God lives, on the edges, with the poor, the forgotten, the oppressed, the forsaken, the ones without names.

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

It has been said that parables are a mirror to the soul.

When we look in our mirrors what do we see.

The radicalness of Jesus' message invites us to see us as we are ... in our beauty ... and in our failing. Jesus invites us to be turned upside down by that vision, to live out of our uniqueness and incredible giftedness but also to acknowledge our complicity with the exploitive practices of "empire" when and where it is present. He invites us to look long and hard into the mirror asking whether our desire is to increase our power at the expense of others – or to lift up and increase the power of others.

These are hard questions. And the answers even harder. If we answer the way Jesus suggests, it will not be without pain. It will take us out of the centre to the margins. It will be dark. And sometimes we will feel alone.

This is a challenge not only for us personally, but corporately, institutionally, as the church.

Mirror, mirror on the wall ...

What does it mean for us to look at ourselves and then to step out of the centre of controlling interest in society. What does it mean for us to no longer have the political, social, moral, and ethical influence we once had. Perhaps it is this new life on the margins if we are willing to see it and embrace it that will bring us closer to those who have preceded us there, that will bring us to new models of caring and compassion, new systems of equity and diversity, and new signs of God's reign.