

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost
November 15, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-8, 12
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

You have heard that it was said, "Seeing is believing."

But I tell you, "It ain't necessarily so."

Consider, for example, the biggest news from the past couple of weeks. The Presidential election is over, and as of the first half of this past week, most folks – nearly 80% of Americans – believe that Joe Biden won that election. Another 13% say the race hadn't yet been decided, while 5% say they don't know. And the remaining 3% believe that Donald Trump won.ⁱ

My point is not to argue the results of the election. My point is simply that for those who believe that Joe Biden won the election the evidence is clear, and for those who believe the election was a fraud the evidence is also clear. For example:

- Some see videos of ballot-stuffing and believe those who say this took place in Michigan; the rest of us accept the news reports that say this is an old video from Russia.
- Some see footage of ballots being burned and believe someone destroyed votes for Donald Trump rather than count them, the rest of us accept the fact checkers who clarify that they're not official ballots, but rather sample ballots.

The difference isn't the evidence; it's what folks believe about the evidence – and what they see.

The same holds, by the way, for those assessing the truth about climate change and COVID conspiracies. The science does not settle the issues as much as some of us would hope.

Because ... although you have heard that it was said, "Seeing is believing," I tell you, "more often than not, we see what we already believe." And what we see is what we get.

And with that in mind, I remind you of this morning's story about a man of considerable means and the slaves to whom he entrusted a vast fortune.

It is, at the end, an unnerving story for a lot of people. In part, I suspect, because a lot of us believe we're like that third servant – not sure we have much to offer. (Just one talent.)

And in part because we are inclined to accept what that servant says he knows to be true about the master ... and what this all seems to say about God.

'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.'

"I knew," he says, as he expands upon the things he thinks he knows.

But on what basis does he "know" anything ... about the master in this story, let alone God?

In point of fact, what he thinks he knows is not the truth. It's just what he believes to be true and is, in fact, a distortion of the truth ... or at best a minority opinion.

The majority opinion sees the master in this story in a different light.

There's something we should know – something that any of Jesus' hearers would have known – and that is what a talent is. A talent describes a measure of gold weight. And not just a little gold, but a lot. By most accounts, the value of a single talent was the equivalent of 20 years of a standard person's wage – say, a million dollars or maybe \$1.5 million.

A single talent is a crazy amount of wealth.

And so, in the story Jesus tells, this rich master is impossibly generous with all three of his slaves:

- He gives five talents to the first, the equivalent of 100 years of wages.
- He gives two talents to the second, the equivalent of 40 years of wages.
- And he gives a single talent to the third, still the equivalent of 20 years of wages.

That's the shocking point to notice. The shock in this story is not the anger of the master at the end; it's the jaw-dropping generosity of the master from the start.

That's what the first two slaves believe, and that's how they see their master – one who holds nothing back, who turns everything over to those left behind. They see no reason to suspect the master's good intentions. They accept his generosity. And that makes all the difference for them. They accept the gifts that are given as pure gift, and they go wild with it all. They're free.

Jesus tells this story – at least as I hear it – to call into question any of our distorted truths. He tells the story to encourage us, to invite us to imagine that God gives with the same kind of jaw-dropping generosity that Jesus describes in his story.

That sounds to me more like the God who brought the people of Israel out of captivity into a land flowing with milk and honey.

And, more to the point, it sounds more like the God Jesus loved to tell stories about:

- a sower who goes out and throws seed wastefully all over the place;

- a father who kills the fatted calf to serve at a party to celebrate the return of a son who had squandered all that he'd been given;
- a king who invites everyone to come to a wedding banquet, so that the banquet hall be filled with guests who enjoy fine wine and fine foods;
- a landowner who pays a full day's wage to those who start picking grapes only at the last hour of the day;
- a good shepherd who would rather die than allow the sheep to be attacked by wolves.

The stories Jesus loved to tell speak of God's jaw-dropping love and generosity.

The life Jesus lived spoke of God's jaw-dropping love and generosity.

Even the death that Jesus died spoke of that same jaw-dropping love and generosity.

It's worth noticing that Matthew tells us that Jesus tells this story just before he is to be handed over to the authorities to be tried and crucified. His death on a cross is his final word on the just how far God will go to communicate love: for us; and for all the world.

So be careful about accepting as true what the third slave believes. He only imagines that his master is harsh and hard-hearted, unreasonably demanding, making no allowances for error.

Be careful about accepting what the third slave believes for a couple of reasons at least. In the first place, it's not true; that much is obvious.

What's more, the distorted view that he *believes* to be true is the reason he sees the master as someone to fear. And people tend to make bad choices when acting out of fear. In the story Jesus tells, it's out of fear that the third slave buries the treasure that had been given him. And it all leads to the harsh judgment at the end.

I'll get back to that harsh judgment, but first I want to notice that a harsh judgment, in the end, is anything but a given.

The first two slaves, I remind you, seem never to have worried about what would happen if the master would return. They had taken all that had been given as a gift. And from that moment on, they were free – and freed up. They went off with their five talents or their two talents and they traded. They took risks with what they had. They could afford to. And it's almost as they knew they couldn't lose.

Jesus never says they had any special business acumen. He never hints that they followed the best financial strategies in order to ensure the best returns on investment. The doubling seems to be due more to the talents themselves than to the efforts of the slaves. All they ever had to do was trust what they had been given and trust what would happen if they put it to use.

And when their master returns, they're thrilled. They're not afraid, not threatened.

For them, the master is the giver of all gifts. And his return, therefore, is a cause for rejoicing, an occasion for them to show what they have made of their opportunities: a chance to show off, perhaps; or maybe a chance to express their amazement:

- "Look, you gave me five talents," the first one says, "and here's five more!"
- So, too, the second one says, "Look, you gave me two talents. I made two more!"

They never even offer to give anything back ... and the master never demands anything more from them. All he does is invite them to enter into joy! That's their "Judgment Day"!

And then there's the third slave.

Again, it's clear that he never understood the giver of the gifts. And so, because he never trusted the giver – or the gifts given – he thrusts the talent back. What the others take as gift, with no strings attached, he carries as a burden. And he can hardly wait to give it all back. "Here," he says in the end, "you have what is yours. (I never wanted it; I want it no longer.)"

I imagine it must break the master's heart. But the one who had given everything at the start gives this slave the freedom to give it all back at the end. If he cannot accept the invitation to receive as gift all that he has been given, he can hardly be expected to accept the invitation to enter into joy. And that's *his* "Judgment Day"!

But you see, he does it to himself. It's the inevitable consequence of how he's lived.

Robert Capon says this about the harsh judgment:

The only reason that judgment comes into it at all is the sad fact that there will always be dummies who refuse to trust a good thing when it's handed to them on a platter. That is indeed a grim prospect. And it is grim because, if we have any knowledge of our own intractable stupidity, we know that those dummies could just as well be ourselves.ⁱⁱ

You have heard that it was said, "Seeing is believing." No, "believing is seeing." I think Jesus' story is an invitation for us to consider what we believe about God, perhaps to call into question our distorted beliefs.

Is the God we believe in harsh and demanding?

Does God have impossibly high standards we fear we can never live up to?

Do we fear that we will be judged by such a God and found wanting?

Or is the God we believe in the giver of all good gifts, the gift of our life, our very selves?

Does God surprise and uplift us – even now, in the midst of a pandemic – with gifts and moments of grace?

Do we see God as the lover of us all, who will invite us to enter into joy, even at the very end?

John Shea sums it up as a stark choice for us to make:

If we have to choose between the punishing God who, like it or not, generates fear and the gentle God who encourages love, roll the dice and choose love.ⁱⁱⁱ

It might be as simple and as challenging as that in the end.

ⁱ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-usa-election-poll/nearly-80-of-americans-say-biden-won-white-house-ignoring-trumps-refusal-to-concede-reuters-ipsos-poll-idUKKBN27Q3DW?il=0>.

ⁱⁱ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Wm. B. Eerdsman Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1989), p. 168.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Shea, *On Earth as It Is in Heaven* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 2004), p. 324.