The God We Imagine

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A few years ago, I read about an interesting experiment involving two groups of people who were asked to play the same game. The rules were simple. Each participant was given a certain amount of money and told that they could either keep it or invest it in a shared pool. Whatever went into the pool would be multiplied, and the resulting amount would be distributed among the participants.

There was one catch. Participants didn't know whether the other people playing the game were trustworthy. They didn't know whether everyone would contribute or whether some people would hold back and simply enjoy the benefits of everyone else's generosity. One group was given reason to believe that the other participants could be trusted. The other group was given reason to be suspicious.

The results were striking. The people who expected generosity tended to be generous themselves. They took risks. They contributed. They created the conditions for everyone to benefit.

The people who expected selfishness tended to hold on tightly to what they had. They protected themselves. They were reluctant to take risks. And, unsurprisingly, they wound up with a much smaller shared pool.

What struck me about this experiment wasn't simply that trust produces better results than suspicion. It was that people's expectations helped create the very reality they anticipated. If you enter a room convinced that nobody can be trusted, you'll probably behave in ways that make it difficult for anyone to trust you. If you approach every relationship expecting to be disappointed, you'll find yourself interpreting even the most innocent actions as evidence of impending disappointment.

Sometimes, we get the world we expect. Which brings me to today's Gospel. The Parable of the Talents is one of those passages that many of us have heard so often that we think we already know what it means. Traditionally, it's been preached as a story about using our gifts. God has given us talents and abilities, and we're supposed to put them to work. If we don't, well, look what happens to the third servant!

It's a sermon that can leave people feeling a little anxious. Are we doing enough? Are we using our gifts fully? Are we disappointing God? Is God keeping score?

But I want to suggest that there's something much more interesting happening here. In fact, I think the whole story hinges on one particular sentence. The master has gone away and entrusted three servants with enormous sums of money. A talent, in Jesus' time, wasn't a little coin. It was an extraordinary amount of money, equivalent to roughly 6,000 days' wages, or, if you're only working weekdays, roughly 23 years' wages! We're talking about a fortune.

One servant receives five talents. Another receives two. The third receives one. And then the master leaves. The first two servants go out and put their money to work. They take what they've been given and double it. The third servant, however, digs a hole and buries his talent.

When the master returns, the first two servants report their success. And the master welcomes them with the same words: "Well done, good and trustworthy servant... Enter into the joy of your master."

But then comes the third servant. And this is where I think we need to slow down. He doesn't say that he forgot about the money. He doesn't say that he lost it. He doesn't say that he spent it foolishly or squandered it on himself. No, he says: "Master, I knew that you were harsh, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

Did you hear that? "I knew that you were harsh." I think that's the hinge of the entire story. The servant has already decided who the master is. They have already determined what kind of person they're dealing with. They see someone demanding, someone unforgiving, someone who takes what isn't theirs and punishes anyone who falls short. And because they believe that, they're afraid. And because they're afraid, they bury the money. And because they bury the money, they produce nothing.

What if the real problem in this story isn't that the servant failed to make a profit? What if the real problem is that they couldn't recognize the gift they'd been given because they couldn't imagine the generosity of the one who gave it?

Think about it. The master has just entrusted them with an extraordinary fortune. Even the servant who receives the least has been given more money than most people in this world could imagine possessing in a lifetime.

That's an act of extraordinary trust. But the servant can't see it. Their understanding of the master is so completely fixed and harsh that even an enormous gift can't change their mind. And so they get exactly the master they imagined.

Now, I don't want to suggest that we should simply accept every authority figure as benevolent. Jesus himself spent plenty of time confronting people who used their power to exploit others. But there's something here about the way our assumptions shape our lives. About how the stories we tell ourselves about the world can become the stories we live into.

What if the core of this parable is that we get the God we imagine, the world we imagine. If you imagine God as an angry scorekeeper, perpetually disappointed in you, you'll probably live your life rigidly, rather than embracing the possibilities of grace. If you imagine God as a harsh judge, you'll probably find yourself looking for evidence of judgment everywhere you turn. If you imagine God as fundamentally generous, if you imagine that the deepest reality of the universe is love, grace, and possibility, that changes how you move through the world.

It doesn't mean you'll never experience disappointment. It doesn't mean you won't encounter cruelty or injustice. It doesn't mean you close your eyes to the very real suffering around us. It means you refuse to let those things have the final word about what the world is or what it might become.

And that brings me to something I read recently from a political scientist named Corey Robin. Robin was writing about the way people respond to frightening political and social circumstances. He observed that there's a temptation, when things are going badly, to become so

focused on the threats and dangers around us that we lose the ability to imagine anything beyond them.

He put it this way: "It is easier to huddle around the campfire of our dread than to march toward a distant light."

I love that image. The campfire of our dread.

There's something people often find strangely comforting about gathering around our fears. We know what we're afraid of. We know what we're angry about.

We can trade stories about everything that's going wrong, about the scary “other.” We can point to the evidence that the world is dangerous, that people are selfish, that things are getting worse, that nothing is ever going to change.

And there's plenty of evidence, isn't there? We don't have to look very far to find cruelty, dishonesty, greed, violence, and injustice. We don't have to work very hard to find reasons to be afraid.

But here's the problem: if all we ever do is gather around the campfire of our dread, we start to mistake the darkness for the whole world. We become so practiced at recognizing what's wrong that we lose the ability to recognize what's right. We become so convinced that people will disappoint us that we stop giving them opportunities to surprise us. We become so focused on protecting what little we have that we stop imagining what we might accomplish together.

We bury our talents.

And that's precisely what Jesus is getting at in this parable. The first two servants understand that what they've been given is an invitation. They don't know exactly how things are going to turn out. They don't have guarantees. But they act anyway. They trust the gift. They trust the one who gave it. And they discover that there's more possibility than they imagined.

The third servant can't get past their fear. They are so preoccupied with what might go wrong that they never discover what might go right.

Now, listen again to Paul's words to the Thessalonians. "Encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone." "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all." "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." "Hold fast to what is good."

These aren't instructions for people who have never encountered hardship. Paul isn't writing to a community living in some kind of carefree paradise. The Thessalonian Christians knew plenty about uncertainty, opposition, and suffering. Paul knows that. And yet, he invites them to cultivate a particular orientation toward the world. Encourage the fainthearted. Help the weak. Be patient. Seek the good. Give thanks. Hold fast to what is good.

In other words, don't let the cruelty of the world determine the character of your response to it. Don't let someone else's willingness to repay evil for evil convince you that goodness is foolish.

Don't let fear become the organizing principle of your life. And don't confuse realism with pessimism.

There is a difference between acknowledging that the world is broken and deciding that brokenness is all there is. There is a difference between being clear-eyed about injustice and becoming so consumed by it that we can no longer imagine justice. There is a difference between preparing for difficult times and living as though difficult times are the only times that are possible. Paul is inviting us to something much more demanding than simply being cheerful. He's inviting us to practice hope.

And hope, in the Christian tradition, isn't wishful thinking. It's not pretending that everything is going to be okay. It's not sitting around waiting for God to fix everything. Hope is a way of living. It's a decision to act as though love is stronger than hate, as though generosity is more powerful than greed, as though justice is possible, as though the future is not already determined by the failures of the past. It's putting our talents to work.

I think about this congregation, and how often I've seen that kind of hope made real. I think about the people who show up to prepare meals for neighbors who are hungry. People who stock the Blessing Box, because they believe nobody should have to go without food. I think about those who have worked to make this congregation a place where LGBTQIA2S+ people can find not just acceptance but belonging. People who understood that the church could be different, that it could be a place where love was bigger than the boundaries other people had drawn. I think about the people who have shown up to advocate for immigrants, to stand alongside people experiencing homelessness, to work for a more just and compassionate community. None of these things happen because people are convinced the world is perfect. They happen because people believe it can be better. They happen because people refuse to bury what they've been given.

And here's something else I want us to notice about the parable. The master doesn't tell the first two servants that they've earned the love they receive, doesn't tell them that they've finally proven themselves worthy. They were entrusted with the money before they did anything at all. The gift came first. The trust came first. The invitation came first.

That's grace. Our faith doesn't begin with the question, "Have you done enough to deserve God's love?" It begins with the astonishing recognition that we've already been entrusted with more than we can possibly imagine. We've been given life. We've been given one another. We've been given the capacity to love, to create, to forgive, to repair, to build, to imagine something better than what currently exists. And we've been given a God whose deepest desire is not to catch us failing but to invite us into joy.

So I believe the question before us isn't simply whether we're using our talents. Rather, the question is: What kind of God do we imagine? What kind of world do we believe we're living in? And how are those beliefs shaping the choices we make?

Are we going to live as though scarcity and fear have the final word? Are we going to spend our days huddled around the campfire of our dread, rehearsing all the reasons why nothing can change? Or are we going to trust the abundance of the gift we've been given, take some risks, and move toward that distant light?

Friends, I don't believe God is asking us to be fearless. Fear is part of being human. There are things worth fearing, and there are times when fear is an appropriate response to danger. But I do believe God is inviting us not to be governed by fear. To imagine a God whose fundamental orientation is toward life, not death; toward liberation, not oppression; toward mercy, not punishment; toward possibility, not despair. And, having received the invitation, we are to live as though that vision is true. Because the world we imagine is, in so many ways, the world we help create.

May we be people who encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, practice patience, seek the good, and hold fast to what is good. May we be people who refuse to bury our gifts simply because the world is broken.

And may we have the courage to step away from the campfire of our dread, to follow the light of God's abundant grace, and to enter into the joy of our master.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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1 Thessalonians 5:14-24; Matthew 25:14-30
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