

A resource to help you in your preaching ministry.

November 19, 2017
Proper 28, Ordinary 33, Year A
Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

Summary

When we experience life as unfair, we may feel anger or resentment at God. If we act wisely and faithfully, we will work through our anger and find our gratitude to God. In that gratitude, we work for the church and continue its ministry, waiting for God's redemption of creation.

Does God Shortchange Some of Us?

We are used to hearing about people who don't believe in God. Their books fill the shelves at stores. They make the rounds on talk shows. They go out on the lecture circuit. They make the argument that the universe just happened, that death is final, that we give life whatever meaning it has. That's one issue. Some Sunday we can talk about that.

Today we talk about another issue: How do we understand God's nature? What is God like? We always assume in the church that God is a good God. We think it's terrible to say anything bad about God. We may think only unbelievers attribute bad things to God. Nevertheless, even the people of God may have such thoughts. We know the psalmist wondered if God would forget him forever.¹ And do I even need to mention the book of Job? Job practically screams at God, "Why don't you just leave me alone long enough to swallow my own spit?"²

Many of us admire C.S. Lewis, the great British scholar and prolific writer. For part of his adult life, he didn't believe in God at all. In part under the influence of J.R.R. Tolkien, he became a Christian. He wrote books that have fed our faith. We love his Narnia stories, some of which have even been made into films. Lewis had his own struggles with faith. We saw that in the movie of several years ago, *Shadowlands*. Somewhat late in life he fell in love and married an American poet, Joy Davidman. After only four short years, she died of cancer. Lewis struggled greatly with his faith. He recorded his thoughts in a diary and published them as *A Grief Observed*. He says in the book that he does not worry that he will go back to being an atheist. He knows he will continue to believe in God. He worries rather that he will believe terrible things about God: "Sooner or later I must face the question in plain language. What reason have we, except our own desperate wishes, to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'? Doesn't all the prima facie evidence suggest exactly the opposite?"³ Lewis writes very dark words about God in his grief diary, words that come from a committed Christian.

The parable

In our parable for this morning, one character has a dark opinion about the property owner. The property owner represents Jesus and so, some aspect of God. The parable tells a simple story: A rich man goes on a journey. He divides up his property among his servants. He doesn't split things up evenly. He gives one servant five talents, one servant two and the third servant only one talent. Let's clarify: these talents represent a lot of money, perhaps 15 years' wages apiece. The one who received five talents got more than he could spend in a lifetime, if the money were his.

In any case, after divvying up the money, the rich man goes on his journey. The first two slaves watched Suze Orman and Jim Cramer on TV, so they invest the talents. They pick a good IPO and double their money. The third slave doesn't trust the system. He looks at all of this with a skeptical eye. Apparently, as an act of spite, he buries his coin in the ground. He doesn't earn even simple interest.

The rich man returns from his journey. He lavishes praise on the first two servants. They have done well. They join the rich man in his party, his celebration.

The parable puts the real focus on the third servant. His conversation with the rich man lasts the longest. The third servant challenges the rich man: "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." Doesn't the servant sound like the psalmist, accusing God of forgetting about people? Doesn't the servant sound like Lewis, accusing God of cruelty? In effect, the servant says to the rich man, "You're mean and you don't deserve all you have!" These words point the accusing finger at Jesus and, by implication, at God.

Here's the part I have trouble getting my head around. The rich man ultimately represents God. The third servant accuses God of meanness and sponging off others. The rich man, the character who represents God, doesn't answer in the way I would expect. I would expect the rich man to say something like, "No, you misunderstand! I give good gifts to my servants to use. I gave you 15 years' wages! You could have done well with simple interest on this money." Instead, however, the rich man, the God character, seems to accept the accusation of meanness. What do we do with that?

Unfairness

The parable has certain characteristics of allegory in it. Parts of the parable stand for some aspect of life, of understanding our faith. The long journey represents our feeling that we are here on our own, dealing with the evil of the world. Jesus' return has run into a delay. God has not redeemed creation yet. God has not eliminated suffering and grief, pain and cruelty. God gives unequal amounts to the three servants. One servant receives five talents, one two and the third only one, for a total of eight. A math major might have divided things up differently. With eight talents to give, a math major might have given two and two-thirds talents to each servant.

Does God treat us unfairly? If we cannot go that far, we can say that life treats us unfairly. Some people enjoy perfect health for most of their lives. Others struggle with injury or illness for years. Some people grow up in happy homes; others grow up with

abuse. We all appreciate the service of our veterans, but did you know that homeless veterans are more likely to die on the street alone than are other homeless people? Life can seem cruel. We can look at life — our own life or the lives of others — and the anger just wells up inside us. How can Jesus stay away on this journey? Why do some people get so much and others not enough? Why is life so unfair?

I am convinced that, even though the parable doesn't say this outright, we should not feel ashamed when we experience anger at life, or even at God. The key is not to stay there. We must work through the anger. We must hang in there with God, even in the face of life's injustice. We do not ignore injustice, but we do not allow it to destroy our faith.

Chapter 25 is Matthew's mission statement for the church. It starts with the parable of the bridesmaids. If you know that parable, you know that the bridegroom takes a long time to get to the big party after the wedding. The smart bridesmaids have enough oil to last for the delay. The delay is where the church finds itself, between the resurrection and the full coming of the dominion of heaven. The oil is everything we do in the church. We need a full supply of oil to keep doing what we do.

What a happy ending would look like

The parable we read today forms part of Matthew's mission statement and adds to the parable of the bridesmaids by teaching us something about what it means to have enough oil. In chapter 25, Matthew gives the church the mission of continuing its ministry, even in the uncertainty of life, even if Jesus' return is delayed.

As do many of the parables in Matthew, this one has an unhappy ending. The slave with the one talent loses everything and is cast out. He is like the man without the wedding garment who is thrown out of the banquet in an earlier chapter of this gospel.⁴ He is like the foolish bridesmaids who don't have enough oil.

What would be a happy ending for this parable? A happy ending would be for the slave to see his one talent as the gift of the rich man. It was not as much as the gifts the other two slaves received, but it was something. He could have worked through his resentment and reacted in hope and gratitude. A happy ending for us would be to work through whatever anger and resentment we have and work for the church, looking for God's redemption of creation.

In the parable, the rich man comes back. He holds a great celebration. The servants who trusted, who maintained faith, join in the celebration. Life in the resurrection will be a celebration as well. If we find ourselves angry at life, or even at God, let us work through that anger to the faith on the other side. The rich man will return! The celebration will begin. If life seems to have given us only the one coin, while others seem to have more, let us remember that even one coin is a down payment on the abundance that awaits us in God's celebration!

¹ Psalm 13:1.

² Job 7:19, author's paraphrase.

³ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1961), 33.

⁴ Matthew 22:13.