

Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 19th, 2017

We are almost done. Next Sunday is the last Sunday of the church year. As the church year changes, we get to move on to a new gospel. You see, we follow a three-year cycle of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary. Each year we focus on a different synoptic gospel – Matthew, Mark, or Luke – and John’s gospel is spread across all three years. While similar in some ways, each Gospel emphasizes something different. This year we’ve explored Matthew on 38 of the 52 Sundays, that’s 73% of the year. In comparison, next year we’ll hear from Matthew only once. If you’ve been here regularly, you may feel like an expert on Matthew. Since you’re knowledgeable, it’s time for a “pop quiz!”

Ready? The first question will help us better understand today’s parable. Question #1: “What have you discovered about Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew?” If you haven’t been here or don’t remember, I’ve included a diagram of Matthew’s Gospel in your bulletin. Again, take a moment to think about the question: “What have you discovered about Jesus, specifically, in the Gospel of Matthew?”

An important word in Matthew is “kingdom,” either used as “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven.” Our summary sheet on Matthew describes “God’s kingdom” as “God’s rescue operation for the world,” or in Luther’s words, God’s kingdom is present when God’s grace and mystery influence all things. Up until today’s parable in Matthew, we’ve heard that in God’s kingdom the first will be last (20:16), the poor in spirit and the meek receive all things (5:3, 5:5), and

forgiveness is better than revenge. You see, God's kingdom is upside down compared to the kingdom of the world. To best understand today's parable, we cannot forget that Jesus advocated for the lower strata, he resisted the Roman empire, and he will be crucified for religious heresy and treason.

With that in mind, here's "pop quiz" question number two: If this parable were an allegory, which character would we identify as Jesus?

1. The master
2. The first slave
3. The second slave
4. The third slave
5. None of the above

Let's talk about each character and what we know about them from the parable.

❖ The master

➤ What do we know about the master?

- Trusted the slaves enough to give them a lot of money (v. 14-15)
- Rewarded the slaves who made him more money (v. 21, 23)
- Gave more to those who had, and took from those who had less (v. 29)
- Punished the slave who didn't take a risk (v. 30)

❖ Slave 1 and/or 2

➤ What do we know about these slaves?

- They both took a risk and received a great reward (v. 21, 23)

❖ Slave 3

➤ What do we know about this slave?

- Feared the master because he was harsh (v. 24-25)
- Was thrown into the outer darkness (v. 30)

Does the master sound like the Jesus we discovered this year? I don't think so. I don't remember the Beatitudes saying, "Take from the poor and give to the rich." In fact, I remember the exact opposite when Jesus said in Matthew 19 (verse 24) that, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." On top of that, the master clearly embraced works righteousness. That is, the slave had to do something right to earn the master's favor. We know that God's grace is free and that punishment is not a result of wrong action. So, given what we know of God, we want to be careful not to assume that the master represents God.

Now, the second and third slaves did find favor with the owner because they took a calculated risk. These two slaves took responsibility for an obscene amount of money that is probably equivalent to \$5 million and \$2 million, respectively. The master clearly trusted these two. In return, these two slaves did not fear the master, instead they trusted him. In good faith, they did the best they could and the master knew it. The easy road would be to bury the money. Yet, the master called all three slaves to do as he would do.

As humans, we often take the easy road. We play it safe, limit our risk, and engage cautiously - all the while we do not live up to our full potential. As U.S. citizens, we do it when we fail to use our voice to advocate for the poor, the oppressed, and the voiceless. As religious people, we "play it safe" when we allow our apathy to result in religious persecution of our Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu siblings. As white people, we are "cautious" when we sit by and allow people of color to be minimized and silenced with a white washed history.

Instead, God calls us to stand up and say that sexual assault is sinful. We are urged to jeopardize our success so we can stand up to sexism and heterosexism. We are summoned to “risk it all” to bring about God’s kingdom, knowing that God is with us.

God’s call to risk it all is what changed the life of one Lutheran pastor in Nazi Germany. You see, Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. He took that belief so seriously that, even though he was a pacifist, he joined the Resistance and helped plan an assassination attempt on Hitler. It was a result of his Christian sense of responsibility that ultimately cost him his life.

Back in the parable, the only person who was close to death was the third slave. This slave did not trust the master, and he made some assumptions that the other two didn’t make. Perhaps he mischaracterized the master, and perhaps that distorted understanding is what led to the slave’s tragic fate?

At times, we are all too similar to that third slave. We are ruined by our own inaccurate perceptions of others and our God. / Could this parable be a warning? Perhaps when we see our supervisor as harsh, then they become harsh. Or, when we see our co-worker as lazy, do they become lazy? When we believe that our God is full of terrifying justice and anger, do our misperceptions of God make us shake in fear and disbelief? Perhaps the third slave is here to remind us that sometimes “what *you* see is what you get?”¹

But maybe the third slave represents Jesus in this parable. After all, this third slave is the only one cast out into the darkness. In Matthew’s Gospel, we know that Jesus will be cast into darkness. He will be betrayed in a dark garden, in the dark of night he will be unjustly convicted, and, even

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-24-a-wysiwig/>

though Jesus was crucified at noontime, he will be executed in utter darkness. Could it be that Jesus is the third slave in this parable? After all, we often find God in the most unexpected of places.

In the end, I'm not sure which character is Jesus. Maybe it's not an allegory, and, frankly, I'm not sure it matters. After all, the purpose of parables is to make us think. They beckon us to ask, "what's going on here?" They urge us to recall what we've learned and to explore what is consistent and inconsistent about our God. They push us into the narrative until we see ourselves in the master and each of the slaves. In the end, if Jesus's words have done their job, we'll likely walk away with more questions than answers, we'll clearly recall God's love freely given, and we'll be open to God's mysterious presence in every character and living person that we encounter. Amen.