

From Whom All Blessings Flow...
Matthew 25:14-30

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Every week we stand and sing together “Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly host. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”

So I have a question for you about that: do we mean it? It is vital that our worship have integrity and the way we seek to have integrity is for our words, our feelings and our actions to line up together. In short, our worship does not have integrity if sing God’s praises through rote and have not in our worship moved to the moment of *doxology*.

Doxology is a composite of two Greek words: *doxos* and *logos*- good and words. It means we say good words about God. To paraphrase the middle English root of the word *worship*, we ascribe worth to God. All of the pieces of our service conspire to do so. The response we sing after the confession- it’s doxology- I have confessed my sin and now, praise God I can lay down the guilt of it. The Old Hundredth Psalm we sang as we processed into the sanctuary today, it’s part of the praise book of the temple community of Israel- it is doxology. Every time we sing a hymn of praise as we do each week to start our service, we proclaim God’s worship. We say it in the Lord’s Prayer: for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, amen. It’s all *doxology*. By some estimation, I ought to sit down right now- we’ve said what we came to say. God is great, God is good- we have worshipped. We’ve given God what’s due. End of story, end of sermon, amen. We’re all early for brunch and we even beat the Episcopalians there.

But have you thought about our Gospel Lesson today? If ever there was a story that would stop the praise in our mouths, that might stymie rote doxologies, it is the parable of the talents. I confess that I moved the lectionary passages around this year to

accommodate response Sunday, and the end result was that this troubling passage landed on Christ the King Sunday. What sort of king are we celebrating if this is any indication of the God the parable points to?

I, for one, cannot move to praising God when I am so concerned about the fate of that third slave. He's been cast into the outer darkness. What did he do wrong? Why does he have to go where there is much weeping and gnashing of teeth? How can we sing doxology when we haven't resolved the conflict? How can we sing doxology if we haven't acknowledged that there is a conflict? In other words, what good is it if we don't understand it or don't mean it?

My mother once told me that more than any other story, the parable of the talents bothers her. After my mother recovered from the task of raising five children and retaining as far as we can yet tell, her sanity, she decided to use her God-given gifts and education to do what she started to do twenty years earlier, to teach young children. Specifically, to teach the ones that couldn't read. Through the years until she retired, her job had a bunch of different names in the alphabet soup that we know as federal programming, each with different stated desired outcomes, but through it all she doggedly continued to do the same thing, to identify children that couldn't learn to read and figure out how to teach them to read. You formulate strategies and overcome obstacles between the child and learning to read. It's a formidable task compounded by such foes as child abuse, alcoholism and things as simple as an empty belly- have you ever try to read when your stomach's growling? All of that stands on top of the already overwhelming difficulties of learning disabilities. It's amazing that any child ever learns to read, let alone children who must make an uphill hardscrabble journey. It's almost enough to make me feel bad

for resenting my taxes. This parable bothered her, and the troublesomeness of it centered around the word *talent*.

Regarding the word *talent*, there is good news. Our text has a long and somewhat spotty history of interpretation, including a literal interpretation of the word talent. Now I will grant the preachers who have treated this word with literal interpretation that the allure of word association is winsome, but it is simply not correct. To Matthew's First Century Jewish audience the word talent would have no more association with aptitude or adroitness than the name of Adam and Eve's second son has with competency. A talent in Matthew's world is just a sum of money- like saying 500K, or 500 grand or a half mil, which, incidentally, is about how much money a talent would have been. So the first slave got about 2.5 million dollars to invest, the second about 1 million, and the third a cool half million.

So the problem lies not in aptitude. The disbursements of talents reflects only the distribution of funds. The question arises, perhaps the problem lies with how the money was handled? The first and second slaves- they were savvy traders. They ran as fast as their legs could carry them to the market and doubled their master's money. I mentioned this was last Sunday's lectionary reading – I've heard from some of my colleagues that their congregation's reactions to this text were quite mixed! Granted, I know very little about the exchange of securities, but I do know this, under normal circumstances, the time that it takes to double one's money is conversely proportional to the amount of risk one is willing to venture. Great Risk, short time. Lower risk, longer time. And I will grant also that given the last twenty years of the market, the scandals with Enron and WorldCom, given the S and L scandals of the early nineties, the collapse of Lehman

Brothers and everything that has subsequently transpired, the timid slave's tactic of stuffing the money in the mattress may garner significantly more respect from the financiers than from the theologians.

But this isn't a story about Wall Street. In the end, the master returns, and there is a reckoning. And it is this reckoning where the problems arise. The master is thrilled with the performance of slaves # 1 and 2. Slave #3, the timid slave- not so much. And here the murmuring starts. What did he do wrong, what will become of him? Theologians start to sound something like playground gossips hypothesizing over the fate of an recalcitrant classmate sent to the principal's office. Theories abounded. Tom Long, to whom I am indebted for my understanding of this parable recounts a few theories in the history of interpretation of this story: In the Industrial Revolution, every preacher knew exactly what the slave had done wrong: He was lazy. He failed to live up his potential. He was indigent and slothful. By the 1950's, everything had changed. In the world where everybody liked Ike, the interpretation of the slave's mistake was this: He didn't know he had a talent. Certainly everyone has a talent and can contribute to the life of the church. You may not be able to knit booties for underprivileged children, but you can sing in the choir or rock the babies. Dr. Long says, by the therapeutic sixties, it had all changed again. The problem: low self esteem. He saw himself as a victim.¹ All of this is to say that in every time there is a tendency to color how we view this or any piece of scripture with our own neuroses, fears and issues.

Which is not to say that there can be no understanding of this parable. The key to understanding this parable lies in sticking close to the text, in not importing our own

¹ From a sermon preached at Second Presbyterian Church, Indianapolis. *The God We Get* by Dr. Thomas G. Long.

issues and anxieties to it, but instead allowing the parable to speak it's own truth to us. So let's take a closer look. What is the master's first action: to graciously entrust vast sums of money to his slaves: four million dollars all told. Matthew's audience would have heard the significance of that action. Masters don't give slaves millions of dollars to invest. It's not done. It's foolish. "I'm going away for a while, I don't know how long, and I want you to take care of my things for me. You- you take two and half million, you take one million, and you, yeah, you there, come here- here's a half a million. Now y'all take care of things for me, and I'll be back later."

Nobody does that! Would you do that with your savings? I don't have vast quantities of money, nor do I have a household staff, but if I did, I sure wouldn't hand my visa card over. Then he comes back. "Tell me how you've done." The first slave, the one with two and half million dollars is elated. "The return was brilliant. You have twice as much as when you left.. You've got five million dollars now." The master is thrilled with his performance- I would be too- "well done good and faithful slave"- and here's where it gets really bizarre- "enter into the joy of your master."

Enter into the joy of your master. Come into my house. Sit at table with me. Don't worry about the barriers of class and just enjoy this with me. *That's not done!* Slaves and free don't share things together. Masters take what is their due and the slave is supposed to be grateful that he is not harsh with them, but this master, he has exceeded graciousness. He has invited the slave in to the inner sanctum. And he does it not once, but twice- the second slave comes- "Look master, I, too, have doubled your money. You have three million dollars now." "Well done good and faithful slave, enter into the joy of your master."

It is as though Matthew is fearful that we might have missed the absurdity of the grace the first time around so he tells the story twice to be sure we catch it. This is a lavish master. This is a master whom one can love. This is a good master.

And then there is the third slave. “I know who you are...you are a harsh and cruel master.” Now, looking just at the text, do we have any reason to believe that the master is either harsh or cruel? Have we seen anything to make us mistrustful of the master? No, quite to the contrary, the master has abundantly demonstrated his goodness and lavishness. No, there is no reason to see the master as harsh or cruel, but still the slave cowers- “I know who you are, you are a harsh and cruel man.”²

How does a person come to perceive God as harsh and cruel? There are so many misperceptions and theological abuses that lead to an inability to perceive joy in the Christian faith, but I won’t dwell on them. It is sufficient to say that though we live in a good world full of good things, we also live in a broken world, full of sin, and when one is taught that God is a harsh and cruel master, it is difficult at best to perceive of God in any other way. Misfortune gets interpreted as judgment. Illness is seen as punishment. Addiction is hell and there seems no way out. We know how one comes to perceive God as harsh and cruel, but there’s nothing in the story to indicate that is true.

But we cannot move to Doxology. Not yet. Not while there is the question of the outer darkness before us. Let me first say what the outer darkness is not. It is not Hell with a capital H. I can tell you this with certainty because Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospel accounts does use the word *gahenna*, a Greek word referring to a field outside of Jerusalem where trash is burned and which we translate as hell in his telling of the story,

² Again, I am deeply indebted to Dr. Thomas Long for his interpretation of this text.

but he does not use it here. Nor does the Matthew borrow from his Jewish roots the term *sheol*, a shadowy afterlife that is neither heaven nor hell. No, he deliberately uses a different term, “the outer darkness.” And while I cannot find a definition for the outer darkness, Matthew does use it elsewhere, and it would seem in each situation that is the state one finds themselves in when, just like the timid slave, they cannot perceive God’s goodness, mercy and grace. While I cannot define it, I believe that we all know it when we see it. I can make that assertion because I can look back and see it.

I remember well a scene from Presbyterian Hospital when I was a chaplain intern. My brother and I had just walked back from Burger King across the street, where thankfully the beeper that I carried when I was on call had not gone off. We’d walked back into the hospital, down the hall to the emergency room where my brother was interning. I’d just turned to leave- I was going to go and read a novel, Angle of Repose, when I heard “uh chaplain...yes...we’ve had a death...okay, whom do I need to see...um, it was a nine year old...Oh...

When I walked into the room, there was no place for doxology. In that room, there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. And, there needed to be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It was appropriate and it had integrity all its own. To move from conflict to doxology too quickly would not rung true.

But the movement of faith is the movement from conflict to doxology. Think about it. Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah- conflict. The angel stays Abraham’s hand, the Lord provides a ram to sacrifice instead: Doxology.

Israel is drug off to Babylon into slavery and disgrace: Conflict. God redeems God’s people and Cyrus of Persia liberates them. Doxology.

He suffered before Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. He descended into Hell. Conflict. The third day he rose again from the dead, ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the father almighty. Doxology.

The psalmist reminds us that if we take the wings of the morning and settle in the furthest parts of the sea, God is there. If we make our bed in Sheol, even there, God is with us.

The good news of the Gospel is that even in the outer darkness of our inability to perceive God's goodness and mercy, there is God. And it is a God who beckons us to enter into the joy of our master. That's a reason for good words. That's a reason for Doxology.

There's a legend that I have heard that illustrates the completeness of God's love for us. It is called the Judas legend, and it's just that, a legend. But it goes like this. After Judas betrayed Christ, realizing what he had done, became disconsolate and threw himself from the branch of a tree and ended his life by hanging. This much is true. The legend picks up here. Judas died and was cast into the deepest of pits, surrounded by darkness. For a million years, he lay there, motionless, unable to feel, unable move, very much dead. Then an almost imperceptible light startled him. Over the eons it grew brighter and he gained strength. One day he started to climb toward the light, clawing his way up the side of the pit, fingernails breaking, the light grew stronger as he climbed higher and when he reached the top and stepped into the light, he was back in the upper room. But this time it was the risen Christ at the feast of the resurrection who greeted him, saying, "welcome Judas. We've been waiting for you."

That is the sort of master we serve. One who invites to enter into the joy of our master. And when we cannot, the psalmist reminds us that even the darkness is as light to our

God. When we make our bed in Sheol, God is there. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly host.

Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.