

Keep Chewing

24th Sunday After Pentecost

November 19, 2017

Matthew 25:14-30

It turns out, the servant was right. “I knew 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.”

He was right to be afraid. The master was furious. A talent was an enormous sum of money – equal to about 15 years wages. Let’s do the math. Median US wages in 2016 were about \$31,000 a year. If you multiply it out, first servant received \$2.3 million. The second received about \$1 million. The third, just under half a million. Altogether, the master gave these servants almost 4 million dollars. When he returned, the servants gave him 7.5. Most investors would be pleased. But this master wanted more.

The first two slaves got that kind of return by trading. They risked the master’s money, and the risk paid off.

But it just as easily could have gone the other way. You win some and you lose some in trades. What would the master have done then? This last slave was not necessarily foolish. He decided to play it safe. He buried the small fortune he was given to protect the principal. He did not steal it. He did not use it for himself. He preserved it. And why? “Because I knew you were a harsh man.”

The irony in this story is that biblically speaking the third servant was the faithful one. Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel and many of the prophets prohibited charging interest. Loans were fine because they were a way of helping a neighbor in need. But God’s law was clear that God’s people should not profit from loans. No one should profit at the expense of the poor.

The first two servants didn’t care. They were happy to trade with the master’s money. The third one did the only thing a faithful Jew could do. The money wasn’t his to loan or give away. If he traded with it, he would be profiting from someone else’s loss. So he buried it.

When the master returned, he praised the first two servants and condemned the third. The people who first listened to this story likely would have praised the third servant and condemned the first two and the master. The third servant acted justly.

If you're like me, you were always told to read this parable as an allegory. God is the master. God entrusts us with gifts and talents. Some people are given more, some less; that's just the way it is. God left the world in our care and expects us to do our best with what we have been given. Someday, we will stand before God to settle accounts and we better have something to show for it.

But is this what Jesus meant? The editors of the lectionary books in your pews seem to think so. The lectionary is that three year cycle of scripture readings assigned for each Sunday. We follow the lectionary because it gives us the discipline of hearing all parts of the Bible, not just our favorites. The lectionary books in your pews gather the readings for each day to make them easy to find. Usually, the lectionary presents the texts word for word. But every now and then they edit a bit. You can check it out later on page 213. The lectionary book starts like this: "Jesus said, 'The kingdom of heaven will be as when a man, going on a journey.'" In my reading a few minutes ago, I read what Matthew 25 actually says: "For it is as if a man." It is not clear.

Jesus did not necessarily say the kingdom of heaven is like this. Jesus did not necessarily say the kingdom of heaven is set up so that some receive more and some receive less and only those who invest wisely get in. But at some point in history, we started hearing it this way. Who knows why. Maybe it was to teach children to do their best and invest their talents. And that's great. Maybe it was to justify economic disparity, which is not so great. Regardless, is God really a harsh master who reaps where he did not sow? Did God who protects the poor decide that those who have will have more and those who have nothing will have even that taken away? Does God delight in profit at the expense of others? Does God cast the poor into outer darkness? I don't think so. Not our God. This could very easily be a story about the world, not a story about God's kingdom.

But I understand how this parable can get turned around. Rather than let the God of scripture shape our world, we often let our world shape the God of scripture. We assumed God is like us rather than try to become more like God ourselves. We sometimes listen to scripture in ways that reinforce our ways of thinking and living, rather than let scripture guide how we think and live. We twist the scriptures to our own ends.

What I'm about to say is not intended as a partisan statement. It is a recent case in point where the Bible has been in the news, so receive it as an example. A few weeks ago someone tried to defend a certain politician's behavior with teenagers long ago by saying it was like Zechariah and Elizabeth and Joseph and Mary in the Bible. This individual admitted the relationships existed. He did not define what had happened as sexual assault, and maybe if he did he would not have said this. But his explanation was that the man happened to like younger women, just like Joseph did in the Bible.

We'll read about the birth of Jesus again in just a few weeks. We know the point of these stories is not about who you date. The point is God's miraculous entrance into this world. Jesus came

into this world in a special way, through a vulnerable young woman found to be with child who was protected by Joseph. This man twisted the scriptures to his own ends.

But he is not the only one. It has happened a lot Christian history. We twisted the scriptures to justify slavery, even though the defining act of the Old Testament was the Exodus from slavery. We twisted the scriptures to exclude women. Though Jesus had women disciples and the church in Acts had women leaders, we focused on a few verses and for centuries told women to be silent in church. We decided it is okay to eat shellfish and pork, even though the Bible says no. It is okay to charge interest on loans, even though the Bible says no. It is okay to work on the Sabbath, even though the Bible says no. But it is not okay for two men or two women to commit themselves to one another for life because the Bible says no. And somehow it is okay to turn away from immigrants even though the Bible says to treat the alien among you as your own kin.

Scripture can be confusing. It is hard to sort out how we are supposed to follow it all in our time. Whether we admit it or not, we do pick and choose. And in the picking and choosing, it is all too easy to twist the scriptures to our own ends. What we have to do somehow is twist the scriptures to God's ends, not our own, to figure out how they point to God's intentions for this world.

So how do we do that? How do we sort that out?

God actually solved the problem for us in a way by giving us an even higher standard than the scriptures. God gave the Word. Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is God's final word on every subject. We will hear it again on Christmas Eve. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. We are to interpret the word of God in scripture by holding it up against the Word of God that is Jesus.

So when we encounter places in the Bible where God tells the ancient Israelites to commit genocide or tells certain people they are unclean or encourages Christians to maintain households with slaves, we understand this is not how the God revealed to us in Jesus calls us to live today. The standard by which we measure everything we read is the standard of Jesus, who is the eternal Word of God.

So by that standard, the master in this story does not sound like God to me. And I'm not sure the point of this story is simply work hard and double your talents, though that is a fine thing to do. And I'm not convinced this story is saying that God is going to come back and throw you into outer darkness if you haven't made enough money or invested enough in the kingdom. That's not what God is like. It is not what I see in Jesus.

But we do live in a world of harsh masters, just like Jesus and the first disciples did. We live in a world where harsh masters sometimes persecute those who do what is right. It is easy to get confused and think that God is like them. And then we fear God. And when we are afraid, we do bury who we are and what we have been given. And that is a terrible loss.

The collect for today gets it right. Our blessed Lord caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning - those we like, those we don't like, those we understand easily, and those that are harder to grasp. The point of all of these scriptures is to teach us to embrace and hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life given in our Savior Jesus Christ. So we ask God to help us hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the scriptures, to chew on these words until we taste that hope of Jesus, until that hope becomes part of who we are.

So w when you hear someone using scripture to justify something bad, keep chewing. When you see scriptures being used to beat up the vulnerable, keep chewing. If you read the scriptures and hear anything other than love, keep chewing. Keep chewing until you find Jesus and his truth sets you free. Amen.