November 15, 2020 Matthew 25:14-30 The Parable of the One Who Said No

Rev. Kerry Smith Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 25:14-30 New Revised Standard Version

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that 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. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Have you ever noticed that the titles we have for the stories Jesus told shape our interpretation of them? We call it “The Parable of the Good Samaritan,” and we already know who’s going to end up as the hero – the Good Samaritan. We hear “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” and we know that a son is going to lose his way. The story we heard this morning is often called, “The Parable of the Talents.” So, we think this is a story about resources. A story about a master handing out different talents to different servants illustrating how God gives different gifts based on different abilities. We hear this story and we might think the master is a stand in for God, the talents signify our gifts and resources, and the faithful Christian response looks like the actions of the first two servants. The last servant is how we don’t want to act. We see that last servant as someone so afraid that they won’t try anything new for God. Too afraid to take any risk, so they squander all their possibilities.

Those titles that we think of for parables, they weren’t written by Jesus. They were added by the editors much later. Jesus did not say, “And now, I’m going to tell you the parable of the talents.” Jesus simply told a story. It would be a challenging story. It might be confusing or disturbing, and it would encourage the listener to imagine themselves and their world differently.

I want to challenge us to hear this story differently. What if we focused not on the first two servants, but on the last one, the one the master calls wicked and lazy? What if we could change today’s title to “The Parable of the one who said no”? What if the master isn’t a stand in for God? After all, the God that we find in the rest of the Gospel doesn’t look like this master. This master isn’t a liberator who brings grace. This master isn’t a lover of creation, a giver of mercy. This master doesn’t even argue with the last servant’s depiction of him as a harsh man who takes what is not his. This master snatches away the one talent, throws the servant out, and abandons him. That does not sound like the God we see in Jesus.

What if talents don’t represent spiritual and financial gifts? In Jesus’ day, wealthy landowners got richer by acquiring more land. To get more land they offered agricultural loans with very high interest rates to farmers who had land. When the farmers couldn’t pay off the loans, which happened all the time, the landowners would foreclose on them and take the land from them. The landowners got more and more wealthy while the farmers became not only poorer but also lost their land. It was a way of life for those at the top, where the ones at the bottom were exploited with little power and little voice.

The master in our parable would have expected the first two servants to do whatever it took to increase their master’s wealth, because they knew they would get a cut of it and their own power would increase. The easiest way to do it was to exploit those who had even less power than they did. This was the world in which Jesus lived. The first people who heard Jesus tell this story would have known exactly what he was talking about. They would have known about the immoral profit-making ventures of an absentee landlord, a landlord who even suggested the last servant should have invested the money in the bank and collected interest on it, something forbidden at that time by Jewish law! Again, does this sound like that God we see in Jesus?

The parable of the one who said no. Jesus introduces this story by saying, “It is as if a man…” It is. Not, the kingdom of heaven will be like …, but it is. Jesus is describing life as it is, rather than what it should be or what it will be. Jesus tells this story right before he enters Jerusalem for the last time, right before he comes face to face with those who would put him to death. His entire ministry he had been talking about the cost of discipleship and the cost of faithfulness. The great preacher Fred Craddock said, “the major themes of the Christian faith—caring, giving, witnessing, trusting, loving, hoping—cannot be understood or lived without risk.”

What if Jesus is telling this story to lift up the dangers that will come when we speak out against oppression and exploitation in the world? That last servant chose to not participate in the cycle of those with more getting more and those with less getting less. That last servant chose to stand up and speak out and say no against anything and anyone that dehumanizes or harms another beloved of God. What did that last servant get in return for taking a stand against what he saw as exploitative behavior, injustice, and oppressive actions that he knew were contrary to God’s hope for God’s world? That last servant was stripped of all that he had, thrown out of the place he had known, and abandoned.

Remember when Jesus talks about becoming his follower by denying yourself, taking up your cross and following him? The one who said no, that last servant, could be an example of the risks we are called to take as a follower of Jesus. The parable of the one who said no.

What have you said no to lately? Have you said no to participating in a behavior or in a system or in a joke that you knew would be experienced by someone else as oppressive or exploitive? Have you said no to doing something that reflected more the way our world is rather than the way God wants it to be? Did that no cost you anything? Did it feel risky? Did it leave you vulnerable?

The last servant said a powerful no and he lost everything. Sometimes we are called to take those kind of stands. But, we also face decisions every day to say no to giving into the power of greed that tells us we deserve more and those with less are just out of luck. Every day we have to say no to the power of cynicism and apathy. Every day we have to say no to the forces of polarization and division. Every day we have to say no to the voices in our heads that tell us to be scared of each other because of the stereotypes we give to another. God calls us to say no to systems and people and decisions that oppress or exploit, because it is only when we are sharing grace, loving creation, giving mercy, and liberating that we are fully being who God created us to be.

The parable of the one who said no. No, this isn’t how the world has to be. No, this isn’t okay. No, my life will be different and I will work to create a community of grace and love. Jesus told this story right before he headed into Jerusalem, before he would have to say no again and again. No to the danger of returning evil for evil. No to the temptation of violence. No to the powers of empire and fear. Jesus’ no meant everything was taken from him. He was nailed to a cross and abandoned. But, then God’s own no went to work. And everything changed. Our world would never be the same, thanks be to God. Amen.[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. The idea behind this sermon and much of its content comes from this sermon written by Rev. Shannon Kershner. https://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2017/111917.html [↑](#footnote-ref-1)