

“What You See Is What You Get”

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Overbrook Presbyterian Church

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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First Scripture Reading: Psalm 86

¹Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. ²Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; ³be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. ⁴Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. ⁵For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. ⁶Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. ⁷In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.

⁸There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. ⁹All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. ¹⁰For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God. ¹¹Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name. ¹²I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. ¹³For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

¹⁴O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. ¹⁵But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. ¹⁶Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl. ¹⁷Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then 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.’ ²¹His 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.’ ²²And 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.’ ²³His 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.’ ²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'



Sermon: "What You See Is What You Get"

You hear this parable preached a lot during stewardship season, which makes sense. Here is a master who gives his servants "talents" and goes away expecting them to do something with those talents. Upon his return, he checks in on everyone's progress and those who have been productive with their talents are praised, while the servant who has done nothing with his talent is cast into the outer darkness with all the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It does make for a good stewardship sermon: God has given you a gift, now go and use it for the glory of God, and for the health and well being of God's church! Amen! And while that is a good and worthy interpretation, and while preachers, better and wiser than I, have certainly preached this text from that angle, there is more to this parable than just an admonition to "use it or lose it."

And apparently it has something to do with "talents." Now, the word "Talent" did not originally mean "ability." It meant a unit of measure; a weight of something precious, usually gold or silver. It wasn't until sometime in the Middle Ages, that the word "talent" was adopted by English speaking Europeans to mean "ability," and that was because of the way it was used here in Matthew.

A talent would have been about 75 pounds¹ and that much silver would be worth just shy of \$21,000.00 today.² In Matthew's time, a single talent would have been what your average day-laborer earned in about 16 years.³

So even though the three servants get different amounts, even the smallest gift, 20 years' salary, is much more generous than anyone could ever expect from anybody, much less a servant from his master.

Which makes the way those servants response to their master, so much more interesting. When you read this parable, what do you think of the third servant who buries his money in the ground? When the master get's angry, do you think that's a reasonable response? What do you make of the servants reasoning? That his master is a harsh man and he was afraid to fail with his master's money?

I think most people jump right to the lesson and don't really think much about it. But read carefully through this again. Bring a new set of eyes to see and ears to hear. What has the master done to be characterized as harsh? Actually, we see him show trust in his servants, putting them in charge of his property while he's away. And when he comes back, he lavishes them with great praise; two of them at least, the two who have worked so hard and been so responsible.

I know parents who wouldn't leave their own children home alone for a weekend, out of fear they'd either sell the house, or accidentally burn it down making a hot pocket.

¹ "Talent." *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Edited by Kathryn Doob Sakenfeld, Volume 5, S-Z, Abingdon Press, 1982, p. 462.

² Computed at the current (1/28/18) market price of \$17.45/oz.

³ "Talent." *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 462.

And yet, this master trusts his slaves that much. And when the master returns, he is more than just satisfied, he is effusive with praise: “Well done good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your master!”

The portrait that Jesus draws of the master is of one who is generous, kind, trusting, and overflowing with praise for his servants. But the third servant describes his master as a “harsh” man, and a bit of an unscrupulous businessman, summing up his feelings toward the master with the words “I was afraid.” So, what is it that makes the third servant draw such a negative portrait of his master? Well, what you see in people; what you expect to see, is often exactly what you get.

There’s an old story, about a traveling salesman who was driving through the countryside on the way to his next appointment. As he began to climb a rather steep hill, a car approached him coming down from the opposite direction. When the other car got close enough, the salesman noticed that the driver’s window was rolled down and as the car passed him, he heard the driver yell out “PIG!”

Incensed, the salesman hollered back “COW!”

But when he crested the hill, he was forced to slam on his breaks to avoid a 200-pound pig that was standing in the middle of the road.

If a stranger yells “PIG!” should you hear it as an insult, or a warning? Had the salesman had a higher opinion of his country neighbors, or of himself, he might have assumed the stranger was trying to be helpful. But he seemed to expect the worst from people, and maybe even saw the worst in himself. Bad people holler insults. And self-critical people expect them.

It is a truism of life, that often, what you expect to see is what you will get.

If your flight is delayed, you can see it as a chance to visit with your family for a little while longer OR you can see it as an inconvenience that is going to make you late and ruin your day.

When your in-laws give your children loud toys that never stay quiet for more than two seconds and have a tendency to go off at odd hours of the night... you can see it as a true gift that brings great joy to your children, OR you can see it as a headache machine and a constant reminder that revenge is a dish best served cold...

When you wake up in the morning to a steady downpour of rain, you can see it as a life-giving gift of God OR you can see it as an inconvenience that means you will have to walk through puddles to get to your car. What you choose to see in any person or situation, is most certainly what you will get.

Now, sometimes people are mean. There is evil in the world. But not near as much as we seem to think. As a country, we are frequently divided along racial, gender, religious, and political lines, and we have the tendency to see people from the other side in the worst possible light.

We give ourselves and the people with whom we agree credit for having the best possible intentions, no matter what the outcome. And for people on the other side, we tend to do the opposite. **We** mean well, **they** have the worst possible motives. Sometimes that may be true, but more often than not, it is an example of our seeing what we expect to see; even if it’s not really there.

While Jesus describes the master in generous terms, the third servant sees a harsh man. There might possibly have been a reason for his opinion, but the parable gives no evidence of anything but goodness, trust, and generosity. So, what he expected to see, an angry, vindictive master, he got.

Tom Long, a Presbyterian Minister and former professor of preaching at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew:

In theological terms, [the third servant] gets the peevish little tyrant God he believes in. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about living with the consequences of one's own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life, and can discover the joy of God's providence everywhere. But to be a child of the generous, gracious, and life-giving God and, nonetheless, to insist on viewing God as oppressive, cruel, and fear-provoking is to live a life that is tragically impoverished...⁴

When I was at Clemson, two of my students brought me a card they found in the street one day. It said in big, bold letters "WWJD: Who Will Jesus Destroy?" Included on this list were hypocrites, liars, the proud, drunkards, homosexuals, and "the implacable." So apparently if you are difficult to appease you may be at risk. Notably included on this list were "the fearful" which is odd since the card itself was designed to use fear to motivate faith. At one point the card stated in bold print that "it is a miracle that God has not already put you in hell" and closed with an invitation to "meet Jesus, either as savior or executioner."

While this is a tad extreme, it serves as an example of someone who sees God as harsh and someone of whom to be afraid. In spite of all evidence to the contrary, the author of this little bit of religious tripe, has somehow mistaken God's grace, for judgment and God's mercy for a desire to destroy.

Certainly, scripture and our tradition suggest to us that God is not always warm and fuzzy. But the overwhelming evidence presented to us in the Bible and in our Judeo-Christian tradition is that "God is good, all the time; and that all the time, God is good." Our Old Testament reading from Psalm 86 this morning reminds us of that: "you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness."

This is the God born witness to across the width and breadth of scripture. This is the God who desires what is best for us, and yearns for us to love God and one another. The goodness of God is sure. In **that** we can put our trust.

Right now, as we await the completion of God's coming Kingdom, we are in that in-between time. We have been given great talents and one day the Master will return and what will the Master find we have done with them? We need look no further than the passage which immediately follows this parable in Matthews Gospel:

³¹When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of his glory... ³⁴Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked

⁴ Long, Thomas G. *Matthew*. Westminster Bible Companion, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. p. 283.

and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink?’³⁸ And when was it that we saw You a stranger and welcomed You, or naked and gave You clothing?’³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of My family, you did it to Me.’⁵

And what Matthew seems to suggest is that, what matters most to Jesus is not slavish obedience to laws and regulations; not strict adherence to codes of purity and piety, but rather loving God and loving our neighbors.

What the master has gifted us are talents upon talents of God’s love and we can either double that love by investing it in others or we can hold onto it and keep it for ourselves. And see, that’s why the master gets angry with that third servant. Not because he didn’t double or triple the master’s money. But because he didn’t even use it at all.

As Tom Long puts it:

...there is a kind of theological economy at work. For those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous, they find more and more of that generosity; but for those who run and hide under the bed from a bad, mean, and scolding God, they condemn themselves to a life spent under the bed alone, quivering in needless fear. “To all those who have, more will be given... but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”⁶

God has given us so much. But it’s not just for our own edification. We are called to use the gifts God has given us for the work to which God has called us. And the love that God pours into our lives, is intended to be shared around, not put in the ground. When you recognize God as gracious and loving it’s hard to see those gifts any other way.

You see, this parable isn’t just about the master. It’s also about the way how we see God, affects how we act in the world.

What we see is what we get and when we choose to see God’s goodness and live in the hope of God’s coming Kingdom, then we can begin to see that God’s creation is good and that God’s people are good and that should set us free from fear and suspicion to live and love.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion. In this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

⁵ Matthew 25:31, 34-40, NRSV

⁶ Long, Thomas G. *Matthew*. p. 283.