

## Pastor Roy's sermon from November 16, 2014

We have heard today's parable many times. We tend to cheer on the slaves who turn a great profit for their master. Isn't that what the kingdom of God is? Doing great things for God? God gives us talents, and we use them for God's service. The world is a better place.

But wait a second! In the parable, does the master care about the slaves or does he only care about his own profit? The parable describes the master's scheme to make money by the labors of his slaves. Yet, isn't that the economic reality that surrounds us? Stock portfolios and bank accounts must multiply. Does it matter how the money is made? Does it matter if the money helps or crushes? As long as the master, or retirement account turns a profit, that's what matters. So is it ok to identify the master as God? How is it that we always identify God with power? God is mighty, first. If there is a powerful character in a parable, that must be God, cause God is almighty, right? Do we identify God with strength because we want to be strong, in control, and on the right side of the one in charge? Did Jesus identify God with strength and getting his own way?

Next week is Christ the King Sunday, and we will remember that Jesus reigns as King, but he reigns from the cross first, before there is any talk of glory. The glory of Jesus is a spiritual reality born of a physical willingness to love, serve, and sacrifice—a willingness to identify with poor and sick and weary. To take up the cause of the most needful since they have been abandoned.

Zephaniah focuses on the kingdom as darkness and gloom, retribution toward those who have used their wealth for selfish ends and greed. The kingdom is the turning of the tables, or recognizing that tables have already been turned. The powerful really aren't that powerful. For a few moments, but how much power does one have who cannot control his or her own greed and misjudgments? And Paul in Thessalonians calls us to awaken and live with Christ each day. To wake up to faith, love, and hope.

So keeping in mind how Jesus allowed his life to end, and the preaching of Zephaniah and Paul, how else can we think of this parable? If we resist the urge to allegorize and oversimplify, resist the urge to always make God the powerful character, and bring judgment down upon the poor and rejected.

Ok, so there are the servants who make lots of money for the master. We like that. Do we realize that anyone in Jesus' day who doubled a return was seen as a crook, especially by the poor. The 5 talent servant probably foreclosed on several tenant farmers and kept all the crops for the master or arranged unfair dealings to maximize his profits. The master doesn't care about the process, just the result—wealth production.

And what about the safeguarding slave? Might he actually be the faithful one? Things didn't go as planned. He drops the ball in his master's eyes. Not even so much as a little interest. Of course, good Jews in Jesus' day would never have charged excessive interest or interest at all—not among neighbors. The master is angry. This servant does not sacrifice all for the profit of the master. "Take away his life savings and give it to the efficient operators." Take away his keys, his office, his housing, his credit card, his car. Throw him out on the street where his sorry self belongs. . . Punished for being careful. For caring for both his master's principle *and* the village people. Do the faithful sometimes appear to be losers? Do the faithful sometimes look and feel awkward or like failures?

Jesus might have told some of these parables weeks or months before he is himself cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. He is cast out not by God, but by the religious

establishment. Perhaps the master in this parable is the religious, political, and economic powers of his day and ours?

We think in terms of success and overcoming and doing well. But is the kingdom more about caring, waiting, and mercy? Jesus was present with and cared for people, but he wasn't counted among the wildly successful. Judged by most standards, being arrested, beaten, condemned to death, and executed is failure. I imagine his followers wondered why so many gifts had to be squandered with his death.

So how does this parable hit us now? Is the kingdom about having some kind of wildly successful ministry or fixing all the world's problems? or is it about being present with those who are lonely and being ready to live in the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth—like Jesus. Of course, the Kingdom is many experiences of Love and Mercy, careful listening and compassion. Pricey judgments for peace. More about good decisions than good outcomes. The Kingdom is the Spirit moving in the members of the Body of Christ. Move, Spirit move! Amen.