

Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant

MATTHEW 25:20-21 (NRSV) *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.'* ²¹ *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.'*

The question comes to mind: what specific behavior prompted the tribute (and I prefer the NIV here), "Well done, good and faithful servant?"

Taken out of context, the capitalist would reply immediately, "He doubled his investment. He made a huge profit." And I'm aware of nothing in Scripture that condemns making an honest profit, unless someone is disadvantaged as a result. So, taken out of context, that would be a reasonable explanation.

But there is context. Virtually no word of scripture is without context.

- First, this parable is one of three parables about the Kingdom of Heaven; it's not about what any of the three servants did or didn't do.
- Second, these parables immediately follow an entire chapter of teachings about apocalyptic things associated with the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven: tumultuous upheavals, false prophets,

*"the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

And then there follows a series of sayings about the necessity of being ready, because you don't know when it will happen.

- A third part of the context is that one of the primary themes of Matthew's gospel is the Kingdom of Heaven. It's mentioned 31 times in Matthew—multiple times more than in any other book of the New Testament. Matthew reports that Jesus began his ministry preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Thus, the theme is established.

All these things must be considered when we look into these parables in Matthew 25; and when we ask, "what specific behavior prompts the Master's tribute, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Perhaps we could compare the behavior of the "good and faithful servant" with the behavior of the "wicked, lazy servant:" What behavior was not affirmed? As we noted previously, he had done nothing wrong. He simply had done nothing with what he had. 18th-century Irish statesman, Sir Edmund Burke, said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

"But I didn't do anything wrong," is the cry of many who, by their avoidance

of discomfort have allowed bad things to happen. "But I didn't do anything wrong" begs the question, "Did you do anything good?"

The ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead identifies three ethical stances:

- I have harmed the widow. Nobody affirms that.
- I have not harmed the widow. A negative approach to ethics.
- I have helped the widow. A positive approach.

An Egyptian papyrus from the 7th century BCE contains this: "That which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another." (Negative.)

In an ancient fable from India, a wise teacher says, "...by making right conduct your main focus, treat others as you treat yourself." (Positive.)

From the 5th century BCE comes this from what now is Sri Lanka: "Do not do to others what you know has hurt yourself." (Negative.)

From ancient Greece, Sextus the Pythagorean said, "What you do not want to happen to you, do not do it yourself either." (Negative.)

From Persia (modern Iran), Zoroastrianism has this golden rule: "That nature alone is good which refrains from doing to another whatsoever is not good for itself." (Negative.)

Bahá'í affirms the validity of all religions, and emphasizes the unity of all things—"We all are leaves of the same tree and drops of the same ocean." Its gives us this ethic: "...if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbor that which thou chooseth for thyself." (Positive.)

I could go on. Here is what is almost universal in human spirituality, which Jesus summed up in the familiar words, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It is one of the few golden rules stated positively.

It calls, not for the passive avoidance of evil; but for the proactive initiation of good. The whimper, "But, I did nothing wrong," hangs its head, tucks its tail and slips out of sight: "I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

In Ephesians 5 there is what we believe to be part of an early Christian baptismal lecture or sermon. This text says baptism is like a move from darkness to light. (EPHESIANS 5:8-14 NRSV) *For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—*

A candle burning in a room with lots of windows, on bright, sunny day, likely won't be noticed. But, on a dark, stormy night, when the electricity goes off, that same candle burning beside the crib, is the difference between panic and calm. It doesn't take much light to make a difference in a dark room.

Notice the text says, “you”—and it’s plural: “y’all” are Christ’s light in the world. We not only passively allow Christ to enlighten us, to show us the way, to light the paths of our lives, but then we are called to be proactive: to let our light shine for others. In today’s consumer culture one might have expected it to read, “Once you lived in darkness, now you live in light.” But no, Paul says: “you are light”, just as Jesus called his followers “*the light of the world*” (Matthew 5:14). You are light, even as Christ is our light and life.

One reason you are a Christian, I suspect, is that someone was translucent to you; that is, you saw Christ’s light shining through someone else, and you came toward the light.

Or maybe someone *reflected* the light of Christ—acted as a mirror. The metaphors are plentiful; and it’s a wonderful thing when the world can look through someone’s life toward Christ, or when someone’s life reflects Christ.

As a pastor I’ve seen it: people wandering in the dark, beginning to move toward the light. I remember Norman, whose life was morally chaotic. He hurt a lot of people before he came to consciousness. Someone asked, “What makes you so different?” He said, “It was like light—I watched somebody’s life and it was like a switch was flipped in my head and I saw things I’d never seen before; understood things I’d seen before but never understood.”

From darkness to light; from blurred vision to clarity; because, someone didn’t just do nothing wrong; but proactively reflected the light of Christ.

Moore, Oklahoma, a southwestern suburb of Oklahoma City, has been struck by major tornadoes ten times since 1998. On May 3, 1999 a tornado struck just as darkness was falling, and the electricity was out over most of the city. The first responders and emergency vehicles were blocked by debris, and were struggling to get to the victims who needed immediate care.

There was general confusion and panic in the darkness; but the cross at First Baptist Church remained lighted and visible for a great distance. Emergency vehicles were using their loudspeakers to broadcast: “If you are mobile, move toward the cross.” As emergency crews struggled to clear paths so first responders could reach those who needed immediate help, those who could walk were urged, “Move to the Cross. Move to the light.”

What a wonderful metaphor for our Missional Purpose: You are light. Never underestimate the value or the impact or the effectiveness of your light. And may our light so shine before this community that the people see Christ radiating from this place, and are drawn to the light. I so much want all of us to hear that word: “Well done, good and faithful servant!