

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

One Talent People

Matt 25.14-30

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Everything I read about or hear about stewardship says that preachers should preach *more* about money than they do. I know the general suspicion out there is that churches talk too much about money, but survey after survey suggests the opposite. We don't talk about money enough, apparently. That's the takeaway. And those aren't from surveys of preachers or fundraising committees. Those are surveys of church members, of worshippers who say: we need to hear in church more about money than we do. The only way I can make sense of that is in the survey, they're given the option: would you rather hear more about money or Zephaniah?

Quite a few churches I've known have a Sunday built into the schedule each year called something like Stewardship Sunday. For many of them, that's today, the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Stewardship Sunday. Often church members fill out pledge cards for their giving to the church over the next year. I've been a part of lots of stewardship Sundays, and actually, the pledging experience can be meaningful. You think and pray, intentionally about your plans for the next year, and you write them down. There is something powerful about writing it down. You see what you've written right there in front of you. It's a kind of promise you make to yourself and to God there in a worship service. Money and worship intersect in this beautiful way.

We haven't done that very often. With our budget, we just approve the budget and then we give to it. Almost everyone gives something. That's how we do what we do, that's how we support Naomi House and pay the light bill and have ministers and so on. The times we've had the more formal pledging have been with building initiatives. We're beginning one now and will almost surely have a pledge day in the spring. More about that later.

Churches for whom today is their stewardship Sunday and who follow the lectionary readings have in front of them, along with Zephaniah, the parable of the talents, Jesus' story about a master who entrusts his servants with various amounts of talents and then goes away on a journey. The story is about what happens when he returns. The servant given 5 of these talents does some business with them and doubles the investment. The servant given 2 of these talents does business and also doubles the investment entrusted to him. "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many; enter the joy of your master." Good stewards are rewarded with the pleasure of their master and invited to share in his joy.

Then there's the other guy. This is what the story is really about, the other guy. He's entrusted 1 talent. When the master returns, the servant says to him, "I knew you were harsh, you reap

where you do not sow, gather where you do not scatter seed; so I was afraid. I hid it in the ground. Here, take what's yours."

Rather than express gratitude that the servant didn't spend it on himself or lose it somehow, the master is disappointed and furious. He berates the servant for wasting what was entrusted to him, a talent and the opportunity to put it to good use. A talent is not as it is used in English. It is not a skill you have or an innate ability. It's not playing the violin or shooting a basketball. A talent was a unit of money. A huge sum of money. Two servants do good things with the money entrusted to them and they are rewarded. A third servant does nothing with it. He and the consequence of his behavior, attitude, and action, comprise almost half of the verses in the story. He is called worthless, which is a harsh judgment. Throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Commentators insist this is *not* a stewardship story for a stewardship Sunday. Of course, it is. Talents are units of money. Here's a story about what happens when you do the right thing with money and when you don't do the right thing with the money entrusted to you. As a stewardship Sunday parable, it packs a wallop—a disconcerting wallop. I don't know what other preachers would do with all of this, but it seems to me that as a story about money the story preaches itself to its bottom line, harsh as it is: do right with money, or you're going to be thrown into outer darkness, which is the gospel of Matthew's apocalyptic description of final judgment.

That'll preach. If you have the courage to preach it. I don't know that we do. And I don't know that we have the ears to hear it anyway. Are people motivated anymore by fear? Fear of hell or fear of God's judgment or God's wrath? Or to put it the way one of you put it recently: do people do good by being made to feel bad? Feeling bad or feeling judged in spirituality has fallen out of favor, maybe because we don't need any help feeling bad about ourselves. We're pretty good at that without Sunday mornings piling on, thank you very much. But there used to be this idea that the fear of God was a good thing—that didn't just make you feel bad but made you feel like you were in the presence of one to whom you owed your life. That a proper, healthy fear of God was necessary to enter the joy of the grace of God in our worship and in our actions.

Yet, we may protest, the 3rd servant was fearful and see what he did. Fear of the master didn't motivate him to do good. His fear of the master's wrath became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ah yes, that is true. A description of God's judgment can cause people to draw away from God in shame. Or it can draw them out of themselves to a new kind of faithfulness.

Take Zephaniah, our Old Testament reading this morning. I mentioned last week that after All Saints Day, our Sunday readings take on ominous tones. It's hard to get more ominous than Zephaniah: "Hush! The day of the Lord is at hand. The Lord has prepared a sacrifice. The sacrifice is you. There are people all around resting complacently on their dregs." I'm not sure I know what dregs are or what it means to rest complacently on a dreg, but it doesn't sound

good. People were resting on their dregs complacently, dismissively saying, “The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm.” The Lord will do nothing about nothing.

The prophet steps in, “Woe to you complacent on your dregs. The day of the Lord is coming. The day of the Lord is a day of wrath that will be bitter and full of distress and anguish, ruin and devastation, darkness and gloom, clouds and thick darkness, trumpet blast, and battle cry. You think God will do nothing. Just wait. It won’t be long.”

The sin of the people who Zephaniah saw was great. They were unfaithful to God. They were unjust to those who needed justice. They were unmerciful to those who needed mercy. For all the benefits they had in their Zephaniah’s day, and it was actually a time of relative peace and prosperity, God’s judgment was going to be unleashed.

There’s really not a parallel in all of scripture to the awful prophesy of the first chapter of Zephaniah. In it, all creation is systematically undone. In the fire of God’s passion, the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

These days, we don’t read much Zephaniah. You’re not gonna find it on greeting cards. But a long time ago, it took center stage in one of the great medieval hymns, a haunting Gregorian Chant called the *Dies Irae*, which translates The Day of Wrath. The hymn, which is 20 verses long, begins, “A Day of Wrath, that day which will reduce this world to ashes.” Straight from Zephaniah. Of all reflections on judgment, few compare with the *Dies Irae*. The author has “remarkable sensitivity to the response of the human spirit to the inevitability of death and prospect of final judgment.”

For 20 verses it continues. A few excerpts:

*What terror lies ahead
when the judge is about to arrive
to take strict account of everything. (2)*

*When the judge takes his place
whatever is hidden will then appear
nothing will remain unpunished (6)*

I know it’s not so lovely in English but in Latin each stanza rhymes, so, you know, it’s a real poem. A Texas-Latin reading of verse 7, in which the poet is undone, I don’t expect you to know the Latin, but hear the rhyming and poetry of it:

*Quid sum miser tunc dicturus
Quem patronum rogaturus
Cum vix Justus sit secures?*

In English,

*What then am I so miserable to plead
what advocate employ, when even a just man is at risk?*

If Zephaniah is overlooked in modern times, the *Dies Irae* song is as well. In churches, it used to be sung at funerals and requiems, now since the 1960s it's not anymore. It was scrubbed from the liturgy for being judged too dark and "judgy" for modern tastes. But interestingly, it's not totally forgotten and has taken a new life That might be unpredictable. You may actually recognize the signature notes from the opening, *Dies Irae*, which you have probably heard, but didn't know the connection. It's a simple tune. You may remember the movie *The Shining*, where the main theme of the movie is called *Dies Irae*. The whole movie opens with this.

What the church has forgotten, the movie tellers have remembered. This theme is used in movies all over. It's all over the *Harry Potter* movies. It's in *The Lion King* when young Simba is attacked by Scar. It's in *It's a Wonderful Life* when George Bailey runs to the bridge asking Clarence to get him back. It's in *The Lord of the Rings* when Bilbo has to drop the ring and walk away. Perhaps most familiar to most of us, it's used in another series of movies. It's used in *Star Wars* when Luke sees the destruction of his childhood home and his aunt and uncle.

The point, that has sat with me, is that while the church set aside the music and the poetry and the prophetic thundering of judgment when everything is at stake and everything seems hopeless, the best stories we tell about people in crisis, who face life's biggest challenges and decisions still remember a piercing truth through the music. The soundtracks of our stories carry on the fragments of the signature notes from a medieval hymn of danger and judgment, that orient us to the terror or unease that ultimately leads us all to the day when God will judge the living and the dead.

We're all the third servant in the parable. I don't mean that we're all failures and doomed to judgment in the way he was, though we all need God's grace in so very many ways. What I mean is that we're all 1 talent. A talent was a large unit of money that signified a lifetime's wages. The talent represents a life. Like him, we've all been given one and only one. The question is: what will you do with it? It really is a stewardship parable--not just about money, but about life.

The third servant just buried his in the ground and waited, and this was the judgment. That's not what your life is for. In the end, we see now, that the parable is about more than your money. It's about your life. We're all the third servant. We're all given the gift of one life, a life that really doesn't belong to you but to God and to the community that makes life possible. What will you do with it? Whatever you have done with it until now that you're proud of or ashamed of, what you celebrate or deeply lament, still, what now? This is the question still before each of us.

At the very least, don't bury it in the ground and despair that nothing matters. You're not dead yet. As long as you have breath in your lungs, as long as you have strength in your hands, as long as there's a thought in your brain, a prayer on your tongue, a beat in your heart. As long as there's a day, it is the day of the Lord. It is the day to live for him, and we are accountable for how we live.

The *Dies Irae* has been removed from church life, except, I found out, it's tucked into a prayer service in the middle of the week in the last days before the beginning of Advent. It is at this time of year, that our only hope is remembered. Because in the *Dies Irae*, verses 8-9 of the song anchor it all in God's grace:

*King of boundless majesty,
who saves the sinner graciously,
save me, source of goodness (8)*

*Remember, dear Jesus,
that I am the reason for your journey here on earth:
do not leave me to perish on that day (9)*

This is our reason for hope. Even Zephaniah eventually could draw strength in a promised hope in God's grace. In chapter 3:

*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save.
He will rejoice over you with gladness;
He will quiet you by his love;
He will exult over you with loud singing.*

A mighty one who will save. Let us hold that image of God near to our hearts. A mighty one who will save, and never be complacent in our comfort because God is mighty. Never be despondent in our weakness because God is good. We worship God, The Mighty One, our Savior.

Thanks to God. Amen.

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