

Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
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Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 55:6-9 and Matthew 25:14-27
November 19, 2023

WHERE IS THE CUTTING EDGE?

Through parables, Jesus teaches. He does not merely give information about God or advice about life but draws his listeners into his teaching and leads them to a choice, whether to go forward with him toward the kingdom of God or to reject the next step and turn back to their own way.

The simplest example may be the parable of the shepherd, at least it was simple enough back when his listeners were familiar with the ways of shepherds and sheep. We now call this positive way of teaching through a parable “the argument from lesser to greater.” I suspect Jesus just called it teaching. His listeners would have agreed readily that any decent shepherd worthy of the name would have secured the ninety-nine sheep in his charge and then gone out into the night to search for the one that had wandered off. That’s what a shepherd should do. So far, so good. But Jesus’ critics have attacked him for eating with sinners and hobnobbing with undesirables. So, the parable of the shepherd leads them to reexamine their critical judgment in response to the unasked but apparent question: “if you acknowledge that a true shepherd will go out to seek the one sheep that has strayed, why do you doubt that God wants me to seek out and call home God’s people who have strayed? Does God care less for the people than a shepherd for a sheep?”

Our parable this morning is harder because it presents us with a negative, a contrast. God is the very opposite of the demanding boss, and yet there is a similarity with our choices in the situation of the servants. Today, we may imagine this master, this boss, to be a Christ figure, but he is not. Rather, he is a very un-Christ figure. He is greedy, reaping where he himself did not sow seed, taking what does not belong to him, and demanding more than he needs. He is rich and determined to keep growing richer. As such, he is not an unfamiliar figure in our world today, the realm of billionaires who cannot get enough.

Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give himself for the unworthy and ungrateful. He tells his disciples they must never lord it over anyone but must speak to others with the respect required in that society of a younger man addressing his elders. Speak, he tells us, as though you were the youngest present. The one who would lead must serve, not demand service. So, no, this boss is no Christ figure. What then is the good of this parable? Why does Jesus bother even to tell it?

He is drawing us in. The contrast forms the cutting edge of the parable in a way that Jesus uses elsewhere. The statement that summarizes the problem comes in his comment that the people of this world, meaning those not concerned about God, know the minds of their own kind better than we Christians know our Lord.

Jesus' listeners know very well that the third servant is in deep trouble when his master returns. He knows the way his boss thinks but fails to act accordingly. So, in his feeble self-defense, he immediately trips himself up, and his master just as quickly calls him out on it. "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter?" Out of his own mouth, the hapless, timid servant has condemned himself.

Matthew's gospel in particular hammers this point repeatedly, that it is not enough to praise Jesus and become knowledgeable about him and his ways if we do not follow up by actually doing as he asks of us and responding to other people with his desires for them in mind. In Matthew, Jesus says those who hear his words and agree they are good but do not then do what his words call for are like a man who builds his house upon sand.

When I was a boy scout, two guys in our troop did exactly what Matthew passes along to us in warning: when we were pitching our tents, they found a sand pit and had their tent up in no time while we were still pounding stakes into hard ground. They were laughing at us, but it rained that night, and their tent collapsed. They spent the night lying under the flattened tent, no longer laughing.

We do not serve a harsh master. Jesus Christ is entirely different from the boss in this parable, but, while it is good to praise him, praising him is not enough. We opened this service singing, "May Jesus Christ be praised!" Indeed, yes, that's a good start for a service or any day as the hymn says, but we must not stop there. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asks in frustration, "Why do you keep calling me, 'Lord, Lord,' but not do as I say?"

Jesus is not harsh and cruel. He calls us to newness of life, right now, right here on earth. He seems to me far less concerned with getting us into heaven someday, after we have died, than with getting heaven into us now, and not for each of us as individuals without each other, but for earth's people and even its creatures. The apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that the whole creation is straining and groaning to be delivered from its futility and to share in the wondrous liberty of the children of God. This news is good and filled with hope beyond the vision of our own smaller hopes.

I put together many puppet parables for children in the church I served in Bridgeton, New Jersey, but this one is especially important to me because Max, the little floppy-eared dog, while only a puppet is nonetheless very real for many animals but also for people,

children and adults, who have been abused, written off as worthless, unwanted and unloved. It is very hard for a child who been unwanted, rejected, or even violently abused to learn to accept and trust love. In the puppet parable, it is hard for Max to know himself as loved, as a real member of the family, because he had learned, not to hate his old family, but to despise himself. So it is with real children and with adult women, men, all who find it too hard and too frightening to dare respect themselves and even love themselves. So they lash out to prove what they feel inside, that love is a lie for them and hurts too much to risk trusting.

What is the way of Jesus? I have told confirmation classes that their learning does not end with the confirmation of their baptismal vows but that the greatest lesson they need to learn and keep learning for as long as they live is to know themselves as loved by God, then, also, to know other people as loved by God, and to keep learning to live accordingly.

To be forgiven and know it is to become forgiving of others. Otherwise, Jesus warns us (yes, in Matthew) something has short-circuited in the forgiveness. If we are forgiven and know ourselves as forgiven, then we become forgiving. Your pastor, last Sunday, added that admonition to forgive others as God has forgiven us, because without that next step, our own forgiveness dries up and blows away in the wind. If we are set free in Christ, then we become intolerant of the injustices done to others, intolerant of the prejudices that deny people's dignity, intolerant of leaving people enslaved whether by the malice of others or by their own doings, failures, or addictions.

So, the call of the parable is to know Jesus as he truly is and then to want what he wants. In the Gospel of John, Jesus finally tells his disciples that he will no longer call them his servants because a servant merely obeys, without needing to understand. Now he will call them his friends because they know his mind and have come to desire for this world what he wants for it, according to the will of God. We call so much that is wrong and hurtful "the will of God" when such is not God's will at all. No, God's will is mercy. God's purpose is salvation. God's motive is love, redemptive love.

If only we could overcome our insistence that God's way is to reward or punish. We do not serve the Lord of the carrot and stick method. Throughout the Bible, especially from Ezekiel to Jesus, we are assured that God takes no satisfaction in punishing the wicked as they deserve. God does not value karma. For God, revenge is not justice; rather, true justice heals, restores, and reunites the estranged, seeking the lost and welcoming home the self-degraded or outcast.

Know your Lord, Matthew tells us. Know your Lord, and then do as he calls you to do, and follow him. Make justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. Amen.