The Secret Life of Silver

November 19th, 2017

24th Sunday after Pentecost

"When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, 'Come!' I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures saying, 'Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!" (Revelation 6:5-6). These are words from the Book of Revelation. In the novel *The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, one character interprets this to mean the prefiguring of our modern age, when everything is measured—an age of mathematics, science, analysis. It is traditionally interpreted as an apocalyptic symbol of famine. It also sounds like commerce to me. Who knows? Perhaps the three different interpretations work well together. For we do indeed live in an age of measurement, commerce, and vast spiritual hunger. Scales are also a symbol of justice. While we all have our differing views of justice, of commerce, of spirituality, of food security—God has God's own. And that is what is interesting to me. Jesus addresses these very issues in his Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus continues the eschatological theme that he often returned to when speaking to the religious, most notably the scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, the wealthy rulers and the academics who ruled society in 1st Century Palestine. Ostensibly, it is a parable about the return of Christ, which we looked at last week, and the rewarding of those who serve Him. The parable, like many others, is quite simple in its essentials—three servants are entrusted with varying amounts of silver or gold while the master is away. The word talent here refers to a measurement or weight—it does not mean an innate gift or ability, although it is often interpreted that way. When the master returns, they have to give an account of what they have done with his money. The One who turned over the counting tables in the temple now uses the striking symbolism of money to speak of our spiritual investments. The parable asks us to consider the nature of the investors and thus the outcome of what we invest our lives in.

"The one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money" (Matthew 25:18). In ancient towns, there were money-changers and bankers, just as we have today. It would have taken less effort for the servant with the one talent to go to the bank than it would have to find a safe and secure spot, dig a whole, and bury the money. The servant wasted his own time and energy in addition to wasting the potential of his master's capital. It is not until later that we get a glimpse into his character: "Then 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But 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? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents" (Matthew 25:24-28). Note well that we learn of the servant's character through his own characterization of the master. He sees the master as harsh and unjust. And yet, he is inconsistent, as the master points out. If the master truly reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he has not scattered, why did the servant not fear the consequences of such a master? It makes no sense. This parable is often used to teach us good stewardship of our resources; in liberation theology, the master is not the hero at all, but a symbol of exploitation. Both interpretations really miss the point that Jesus is making. In burying the silver, which is not his to do with as he pleases, the servant reminds us of those who hide the light that God has given to them: "No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:15-16). In burying the silver, the servant is burying something valuable, hiding it away from the world. It is a depressing image of faithlessness and apathy. The servant could have at least had some fun and squandered it on loose living like the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Or, like the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), he could have spent it all on benevolence. Either path would have at least had some passion in it. And if he had buried it in good faith, not trusting the times or his own skills, saying, "I really did not know what to do—I was worried about the fluctuating currency, I thought you should at least have some stable, untouched capital that nobody knew about"—I imagine the master might have taken a more lenient view as well. The servant did no such thing. The servant is an empty character in every way because he does not care. Apathy, ingratitude, arrogance and a false view of who the master is—these characterize him and inform his actions. It calls to mind the criticism that Jesus levelled against the Pharisees: "For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in" (Matthew 23:13). What is the one thing that legalism and antinomianism have in common when it comes to religion? God is rendered absent or treated as a nonperson despite the fact that the revelation belongs to God.

In what way do we bury our talents or place our lamps under baskets to hide the light? There are numerous ways, I suppose. First and foremost, we hide the light when we do not really need Jesus in all His fullness. Jesus said as much to the Pharisees: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!" (Luke 4:23); "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Luke 5:31). When we are too good for Jesus, we bury our treasure, and we hide our light. There are other ways that extend from this. When we withhold the good that we can do, when we bury the truth, when we trample on virtues, when we mock what is sacred, when we belittle or take away the hope of others in various ways, we become like the Pharisees that Jesus was addressing. Another method for hiding what you have is wasting it out of vanity or pride. Arrogance is always the first step in sin. It was so in the Garden of Eden, and it is so today. Ivan Andreyevich Krylov was a fabulist and poet of the 18th and 19th centuries. He wrote a beautiful little fable called "The Rain Cloud" which goes like this: "A great cloud passed rapidly over a country, which was parched by heat, but did not let fall a single drop to refresh it. Presently it poured a copious stream of rain into the sea, and then began boasting of its generosity in the hearing of a neighbouring Mountain. But the Mountain replied, 'What good have you done by such generosity? and how can one help being pained at seeing it? If you had poured your showers on the land, you would have saved a whole district from famine. But as to the sea, my friend, it has plenty of water already, without you adding to it" (*Krilof and His Fables*. Tr. W.R.S. Ralston. 3rd Edition. London: Strahan and Co., 1871. 105). What are our real motives when handling the gifts we receive? Karl Marx once argued that capitalism will provide its own gravediggers. In some sense, religion produces its own gravediggers as well. When we want Jesus to remain in the tomb, safe and out of the way, when we want to lift high our own ideas rather than the light of Christ, when we trust in our honours, our riches, our status, or the fact that we know better—we bury what is good and true. I think Jesus purposefully had the last servant bury the money because he knew that the scribes, teachers, Pharisees and Sadducees wanted to bury him and keep him buried. Dead poets and philosophers are great—you can quote them but never have to meet them or deal with them. There is nothing more threatening and menacing to arrogance, corruption, injustice, irrationality, exploitation, tyranny, cruelty and dishonesty than a living Christ and a continuing kingdom of heaven. The sad thing is, when we bury what we have been given, we bury ourselves. Jesus said that the hypocrites were like whitewashed tombs (Matthew 23:27). And that is a lonesome, dismal and tragic picture—to be buried alive in yourself. Jesus may be referencing good stewardship; he may be talking about sharing—but if anything this is a beautiful parable indicting nihilism—it is a cry of love begging us not to bury ourselves alive *but to live*: "For 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" (Matthew 25:29). And we have indeed been given so much from God.

The beauty of the gospel is that I can reach this part in the sermon. Just as Romans 8 follows Romans 7. This is the part where the darkness is washed away, where the light shines forth, where our weakness is mended by the strength of God. It is an empowering parable. Investment has its rewards, especially in spirituality and in the life of Christ. Since we are not speaking in terms of material silver and gold, what is it that we can invest? What has God given you to invest? The easy answer is: our time, our money, our abilities. Sometimes, we might feel that we don't have much of either of the three, or the Holy Spirit does not allow us to use them. Are we then bankrupt? Jesus says we are rich in our bankruptcy: "Blessed are the poor" (Luke 6:20). Paul said the gospel moves forward without wisdom or status: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Remember, Jesus was low and despised in this world. Jesus was thought to be foolish. Jesus was not considered wise by human standards, and people still mock him. Don’t worry. Sometimes I get laughed at for the things I believe. Yet, those things got me through some very difficult times in my youth and even now. Those things keep me close to Christ. And those things have helped others I met along the roads of life, and enabled them to get through difficulties. The world is going to mock you and try you anyway. Ignaz Semmelweis, the German-Hungarian physician who first pioneered hand-washing in the General Hospital of Vienna, was ridiculed by the medical establishment of his time (*Wikipedia,* s.v. Ignaz Semmelweis), even though he had data showing the rapid drop in purpureal fever after he introduced hygiene. He basically reduced the infant mortality rate in a maternity ward to less than 1%! The man who championed hand-washing in hospitals was ignored and treated with condescension. The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4)—what are we afraid of?

To return to Paul, his statement is humbling, challenging, and yet absolutely liberating. It means we don't have much of an excuse for not striving for the gospel. It also means that we do not need to worry—God supplies the capital you are to invest. What, then, do you have? You have you! You are a saint; you have a soul. Live as saints who have souls, as though you are on the greatest spiritual adventure of all time in quest of celestial treasures. You have the Holy Spirit (John 14, 15). You have the word of God, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). You have the wisdom of God, the wisdom from above: " the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). You have the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Moreover, we possess God: "Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:29). We should value these, invest these and invest in these. And thanks be to Jesus Christ, we have the body of Christ—we have one another to invest in. It is always good to invest in people. Simon Sinek, a marketing consultant and popular speaker, has said: "We should invest in people not ideas. A good idea is often destroyed by bad people and good people can always make a bad idea better." I wholeheartedly agree. We are an age enslaved to ideas and to isms. How many isms can you name? They come from a wide spectrum of science, philosophy, art, and critical theory: Jesusism, socialism, structuralism, Lysenkoism, post-structuralism, Socianism, pyrrhonism, classicism, communism, anarchism, modernism, postmodernism, posthumanism, nihilism. Ideas are like the Hydra. Decapitate one tentacle and you get ten more. And the interesting thing is that for most ideas, nobody can wholeheartedly live up to their labels. There have never been pure versions of any of these isms, and yet many have managed to create a lot of collateral damage along the way. Ideas come and go. Likewise, technology. My cassette tapes are collecting dust. The day is coming when nobody is going to care about smartphones or apps—hard as it is to believe. Michael Ramich has said, "Investing in the advancement of technology is important, but even more important is investing in people we believe in and trust…like any relationship, building that trust takes time." (Michael Sneddon, "Why People Are Your Best Investment" *business2community.com*).The human beings remain. The human narrative is far from over, and the divine narrative has no beginning and no end. Ideas are important—but only when they are not idols. Every idol we encounter blinds us to the value of one another, to the value of what matters most in creation, to the value of celestial treasures that God would bestow on us for all time.

The ones in the parable who invested did not say much about their master. They did not have to. Their actions spoke. They merely did what their master would do; they probably did what they had seen their master do—they worked hard, they trusted their master, they trusted in the nature of riches to grow more riches. The ones who trusted and worked did well; they were good and faithful servants (Matthew 25:19-23). I wish that we too would take our gifts seriously, make time for them, be willing to invest them and be willing to take risks for them. Jesus risked everything he had for our celestial riches, for our salvation, for our entry into the joy of the Master.