

Read, Mark, Learn

A Sermon for Proper 28, Year A

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Okay, now open your Bibles to Matthew chapter 25... Oh wait.

Even in more “normal” times, when our pew racks are lined with books, one of the quirky things I noticed when I came to the Episcopal Church was that it can sometimes be...challenging to find a Bible. Granted, I came from a tradition where Bibles were stocked in the pews AND if you were particularly devoted you would tote your own copy to church in a sleek zippered bag. My mom liked to take brief sermon notes in the margins and discuss with the preacher any time he recycled material.

So I can see how the Episcopal Church gets its reputation. Even our Gospel book and lectern Bible are split up according to the lectionary cycle, so if you're hunting for a particular chapter and verse, you might be frustrated. The claim that the Episcopal Church “doesn't use the Bible” is a ridiculous one, though: we read [three to] four passages from Scripture every Sunday. The hymns in our hymnals and supplements frequently have biblical themes. The Book of Common Prayer draws heavily from Scripture—that's the source of the old joke: St. Swithin's church matriarch decides, as an octogenarian, that it's time to finally sit down and read the Bible. When she finishes, she tells the rector, “I had no idea how much the Bible quotes the prayer book!”

I feel like I talk about the lectionary frequently, about how readings are assigned to each Sunday according to a three-year cycle. Well, Scripture is far from the only thing that varies seasonally—we also change colors, and we change some of the prayers we use. Another part of the service that is assigned weekly is the “Collect of the Day,” the prayer we read towards the beginning of the service. This prayer “collects” our thoughts as we prepare for worship, and it varies by season. This morning's collect is the collect assigned to this particular week—and oh, look, it talks about Scripture: “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life...”

This doesn't sound to me like a church that doesn't like Scripture! We just asked God to help us study, learn, and live the Scriptures to enable us to embrace our salvation! If that didn't clear it up enough, let's focus on my role for a moment. Becoming a priest took a lot of preparation, including several years of postgraduate education—and after the preparation I stood before bishop and congregation and took vows.

I can tell you this: the service didn't skimp on scripture. There's a part in the “presentation” portion of the priestly ordination service in which the ordinand—the person being ordained—states, “I solemnly declare that I do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New

Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation.” It’s a strong statement strongly said. Not much later, in the “examination” portion, the bishop asks the ordinand if she will “be diligent in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures.” Only after both of these proclamations (among others; if you’ve never attended an ordination, you might check out the service in your prayer books—it’s actually interesting reading), only after these bold statements about Scripture is the Priest consecrated.

Okay, so we’ve established the importance of Scripture. Now, what? I was struck by the interplay between this theme, highlighted in the collect, and today’s gospel reading. It’s the “Parable of the Talents” and it’s honestly kind of a strange story. A wealthy man summons three of his slaves and entrusts them with varying numbers of “talents,” then goes away “for a long time.”

While he’s gone, two of his slaves invest what they’ve been given, and double it, making huge profits for their master. The third slave, the one given the least in the first place, digs a hole in the ground and buries the single talent that was given to him.

When the master returns, the slaves who invested their talents and earned a profit are commended, given even more wealth, and invited to “enter into the joy” of their master. Then it’s the third slave’s turn. When his action is revealed he is called “wicked,” “lazy,” and “worthless,” and thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The most common interpretation of this passage is one we generally connect to stewardship: each of us is given a certain supply of talents by God. This might mean financial resources—a talent was a good sum of money in Jesus’ day—or it might mean the other ways we’re gifted, our skills and, well, talents.

If we invest and grow our talents and use them boldly for the sake of growing God’s kingdom, we will be rewarded. If we bury our talents, we will be derided, punished, and cast out.

It’s a great passage for a stewardship sermon. It’s a great opportunity to talk about calling, about using our gifts, about being brave and bold. But it’s not the definitive take on this parable. It may not even be the best one.

What if the story is completely different? What if the third slave is actually the hero of the story? New Testament professor and theologian William Herzog gives us some context for this.

First, the value of talents. A talent was no small sum of money; it was a weight of precious metal, usually silver or gold, that was worth about twenty years of an ordinary worker’s wages. To most of Jesus’ audience even a single talent would have been a staggering, unthinkable amount, especially to receive as a lump sum. It was the sort of thing limited to the wealthy elite.

And how did the wealthy elite come by sums of money like this? By lending money to the farming poor at exorbitant interest rates—60-200%—with the farmers’ land as collateral. If the

farmer was desperate enough, they'd accept the terms, but when something inevitably didn't go perfectly, they would find themselves drowning in debt, forced to foreclose and surrender their land and livelihood.

Of course, those running these lending operations didn't do their own work; they relied on middle management to do the legwork and run enforcement. As long as these middlemen kept the money flowing for the master, it was understood that they could sweeten the pot for themselves—charge a little extra interest; pocket a small percentage. Their status and well-being is tied to the master's; when they do well for him, their own lives become better and more comfortable.

So through this lens, we have two slaves who participate in the master's scheme, obeying him in his absence, turning an excellent profit, and being rewarded with greater comfort. And then we have a slave who refuses to participate, who opts out, who takes the money out of circulation by literally burying it. According to some readings, he names the exploitation of this money-making process, relinquishes any claim on money or power, and opens himself to the consequences—in this case being deemed worthless and cast out.

In this reading, the parable is not so much about the work of building the kingdom, but about where we are right now, about how to live faithfully when we identify exploitation and injustice. It's still a parable about using your resources, but in a much different, much more subversive, much less comfortable way.

So which is the "right" reading? I don't know. I'm not sure there is one. I think there is wisdom to be gained by both, by all the work that Christians and scholars through history have put into understanding the Word of God. I also know that once we think we have the Bible "figured out," it's probably time to start asking ourselves some hard questions. My message this morning is not about telling you the path to take, but about encouraging you to take the steps.

When we truly take Scripture seriously, seriously enough to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it, there is no simple instruction guide, no easy path to salvation. Instead, we work out our salvation every time we wrestle with these words, every time we live with them, every time we lay them on our hearts in the certain confidence that God loves us enough to become as one of us, so that we might not die, but live.

In that joy, may we let the Word of God pierce our hearts, trouble our minds, and upend our assumptions—because this is how the Kingdom of God is built.