The Master's Gone Away

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> For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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." 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." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." 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." 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. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV)

Justo: The Parable of the Talents is so well known, and so often used in order to deal with matters of stewardship, that it seems odd to begin a series of Bible studies for specialists on

stewardship with one more study of that parable. And yet, precisely because it is so well known, precisely because in some ways it is the very foundation of our understanding of stewardship, the parable deserves at least one more look.

Note first of all that the parable is about obedience to an absent master: "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away."

A similar dimension may be seen in many of the parables that illustrate the nature of our stewardship. In many of those parables, there is a master, an owner; but also in them the master is absent. Indeed, the theme of the absence of the master runs through those parables that we usually call "the parables of stewardship."

Earlier in this 25th chapter of Matthew, in the parable immediately preceding the Parable of the Talents, we read that "Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom . . .But the bridegroom was delayed." In other words, he was not present, and they had to decide how to act in his absence.

In Matthew 24, "But if that wicked slave says to himself, 'my master is delayed,' . . .the master of that slave will come. . ."

And in Matthew 21, "There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country."

All of these parables, in one way or another, speak of the absence of the master, or of the bridegroom, or of the owner.

We often speak of the presence of God, and rightly so. But this other theme or metaphor of absence is also common in the Bible. Even apart from sin, God gives the human creature space, freedom to exercise its responsibility. You remember the story in the garden, how after creating humankind and giving it dominion over the rest of creation, God lets them exercise that dominion even though it also implies the possibility of sin. And this absence, just as much as the divine presence, is a sign of love, just as a parent out of love finds it necessary to step back and let a child try its wings, even at the risk of pain, and failure. A parent who is always present, guarding a child from every risk and every hurt is not a very good parent. A child whose parents are always hovering around, guarding the child's every step, will never grow up. Søren Kierkegaard expresses the same idea with a different metaphor when he says that a soldier's faithfulness to his captain is not proven when the captain is absent, but rather when the captain is present, and obedience is still required.

Even apart from sin, God's absence, the space that God gives us to grow, to be responsible, to try our wings, is a sign of God's love.

But then, the divine absence has an added dimension: sin has come into the picture. This is indeed God's world. But it is God's rebellious world. This world, made by God, is also godless. In this godless world of God, the image that appears so frequently in the parables, of the absence of the master, is both a realistic description of our present situation and a call to responsibility. While the master is away, the steward must run things according to the will of the absent master. We still do not see the glory of the reign of God. We still do not see justice being done for the weak that have been pushed aside by the strong. We still do not see the peace and security and justice that are God's will. And yet, we know that this is God's world. As the hymn says, "Oh, let me ne'er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." In the end these promises will come true. And we must act accordingly.

Catherine: It is not only the Gospel parables that deal with this theme of God's absence. The apocalyptic material also assumes it, but in a different way. Daniel, the Book of Revelation, the brief apocalyptic sections of other Biblical material are concerned with human freedom that not only can but clearly has chosen to follow evil ways. Forces of evil are seen as direct competitors of God for human loyalty. The community of faith has chosen to side with God. The powers that be in society have chosen to be instruments of evil, wittingly or unwittingly. Persecution of the faithful is the result. To the faithful, God appears absent from the fray, as though giving evil free rein to see who will choose to be its followers. The reason God is so willing to give evil such leeway is that the final judgment is close at hand. Those who have chosen to follow evil will be judged. Their sin will be obvious to all. There will be no room for excuses because their own deeds will convict them.

Therefore, God's absence can be seen in two rather different ways. First, as the beneficent act of a Divine Parent who wishes to help human creatures develop into mature, responsible adults, by giving them space, not forcing their decisions. This does mean that humanity makes mistakes, hopefully learning from them that God's way is best. Second, God's absence can be seen as the culmination of human history, where the battle lines between good and evil, between God and the demonic are being clearly drawn in preparation for the final judgment that is just about to begin.

How are we to understand this parable of the talents? It appears to be a mixture of both understandings of God's absence. The role of steward points to the need for independent action on the part of the slaves. Were the master always there making all decisions, there would be no need for stewards. At the same time, the return of the master clearly points to the time of judgment. In fact, in the parable it is a rather final judgment for the slaves. Their future is decided on the basis of their behavior during the master's absence.

This parable deals with the actions of God's servants during the time of the apparent absence of God from the plane of human history. One could assume that all human beings are called to be God's stewards. That may be. But at least those who are part of the household of faith, who acknowledge God as their Lord, know that this is their role. Even the humblest has some little part of God's world for which their faithfulness can make a difference. How near the end of history is, how close the final judgment is, is an interesting issue to speculate about. It ought

not to have a bearing on our faithfulness. Our time is very limited, whether the world's is or not.

Justo: What the master gives each of the three servants is a substantial amount of money. We are so accustomed to using the term "talents" as a synonym of "ability" or "gift," that we forget that for Jesus' first hearers a "talent" was a sum of money—indeed, a rather considerable sum of money. It would take a fully employed wage earner, working almost every day of the year, approximately 15 years to make a talent. Thus, what the first servant receives is not a "gift" or an ability to do something, but a sum of money in the neighborhood of two million of today's dollars. The second gets some $800,000. And we have little reason to feel sorry for the third, who receives some $400,000. To Jesus' first hearers, most of whom probably never saw more than an occasional silver coin, those sums must have seemed fabulous. They certainly would not have thought, as we often do today, that the third servant received a paltry sum. It is not, as sometimes we tend to think, that the third servant received such a small sum that he thought it was not worth investing. They are each given what could be considered a substantial working capital.

Then there is another element we often miss in the parable. In verse 15 we are told that the master distributed these talents among his slaves, "to each according to his ability." What this means is that in a sense the burden on the slave with five talents was no greater and no lesser than that on the slave with one talent. They had received their various sums according to their different abilities, and each could make good on what he had received or fail at its

management. Thus, none of them could plead that what he had received was too much responsibility, or too little to invest. What each servant receives is not an arbitrary figure, determined by the whim of the master. What each receives is determined by his ability, by what he can reasonably be expected to manage well.

Catherine: (Read vv. 16-30) The slave who had one talent behaved in a radically different fashion from the others. He did have an ability that has already been established. He evidently had less ability than the others, but he had some ability, nonetheless. He has been entrusted with one talent, a very significant sum. He is afraid of losing it, of being unable to restore it upon the master's return. So, he puts it in a safe place where he can give it back, unchanged. The master's directions to the slaves did not include any directions for what they were to do.

Why should that servant be blamed? He guarded the master's property very well. One could almost say that he guarded it far better than the other two guarded their shares. After all, the other two must have been taking some serious risks if they managed to double their investments. They could have lost everything.

Nor is there any argument with the third slave's appraisal of the master—that he was harsh in judgment. The master agrees with this assessment. So, fear made this slave very cautious, so cautious that he guarded the money he was given and preserved it intact. For that he is blamed. Why? Because he was a guard, he was not a steward. He was called to be a steward, one who manages the master's possessions, who acts for the master, especially when the master is absent. Fear and guilt create guards. Grace and love create stewards.

The one who tithes out of a sense of fear, afraid that God will be angry if they do not do so, or whose generosity is created by a legalistic sense that only on that basis will God be propitiated, that one is a guard, no matter how much they give. The one who loves God and God's world, who responds out of gratitude for the grace of God, that one is a steward. The steward takes risks; the guard does not. The steward truly acts as he believes his master would were he there. He uses his best judgment in this matter, believing that if he does so, he will have his master's blessing. In a sense, the slave who acts as a true steward has, at least for the time being, ceased to be a slave. He acts like the master. The slave who refuses this role, who guards what he has been given, refuses the role of steward and therefore remains all the time a slave.

There is another interesting detail we often overlook in these verses. The master says that the slave should have invested his one talent with the bankers so that when the master returned, he "would have received what was my own with interest." Clearly, the talent and what it earned were the master's. That makes sense. But then notice what is to be done with that one unproductive talent. Instead of being returned to the master, it is to be given to the slave who had originally been given five talents. Nor does it appear that the more productive slave is simply to manage more. What the master says is, "to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance." Already the two profitable stewards have been invited to share in the joy of the master. This is another indication that their status as slaves has changed.

These few verses lead us to two very important conclusions: First, God is nurturing us away from slavery toward the free life for which we have been created. Seen in that light, the parable has strong parallels to Paul's words to the Galatians:

> My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us." (Galatians 4:1-3a NRSV)

Human beings have been created to be God's children, joint heirs with Christ. Though there is an appropriate time in which we are kept as slaves, being trained for our future role, the time comes when we are invited to enter into that new role. For Paul, faith marks that passage. In this parable, being given the master's property to manage in his absence is that time. The first two slaves act appropriately as stewards, acting really as masters, no longer as slaves. The third does not but prefers to remain a slave. The steward has much more responsibility, and that can be fearsome. But God is calling us to that new role, and faith is able to overcome the fear and take the risks, knowing that it is not a harsh master but a loving Parent who is calling us to make that transition.

Second, the church needs to be clear that in its education for stewardship it is truly nurturing stewards and not guards. Not only in regard to financial resources, but in regard to human resources and property, the church needs to encourage the kind of risk-taking for God's purposes that true stewardship encourages. It is faithfulness and not money that is the bottom line.

The verses of explanation following the condemnation of the risk averse slave need to be seen in this context. They can easily be misused. "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." These are not words of praise about a human economic system that takes from the poor in order to make the rich richer, even though some have been tempted to use them for that purpose. These are words about God's goals of human stewardship of all that God has created. In human terms, one can be economically "successful" while in God's terms be a completely unproductive servant. Christians need to be very clear about this distinction. Those who are unproductive stewards, either because they are guards rather than stewards or because they make no pretense of seeking to serve God's purposes, are condemned by this passage. Nor can one seek to be economically successful without regard for being a steward, and then seek to be a steward with what has been gained in such endeavor. The worthless slave is condemned in harsh terms, cast into outer darkness.

Justo: But in some ways the passage does not end with verse 30. We are so accustomed to reading this parable as a unit, that we often forget that what follows is in some ways the interpretation of the parable. In the parable, the master's temporary absence ends with his return to receive reports and render judgment. As a result, the parable speaks of some who are invited into the joy of their master, and another who is cast out into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The passage that follows immediately after the parable deals with the same subject: the return of the absent master and the ensuing judgment. It is the well-known passage of the Judgment of the Nations, that begins: 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory . . . he will sit on the throne of his glory." What results is the separation of the sheep and the goats, in which some are praised and given the kingdom as inheritance, and others are condemned and cast out into eternal fire.

What we often miss, however, is that while the Parable of the Talents and so many of the other parables about stewardship speak of a master who is absent, the passage about the judgment of the nations speaks about a master who is present, not only after his return but even during his apparent absence. Note that the Son of Man returns, and tells those on his right hand as well as those on his left: "I was hungry . . . I was thirsty . . . I was a stranger . . ." In other words, even during my absence I was present.

The Parable of the Talents tells us that the Master is absent, and that during that absence we have responsibilities. The judgment of the nations tells us that even while he is absent the Master is actually present. But he is present, not where we would expect, in the manor house or in the seignorial palace or even in the church, but rather in the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the prisoner, the sick . . .

Put the two together back-to-back as they appear in the Gospel, and the contrast is quite striking. It must have been particularly striking for Matthew's first readers, who knew full well what a talent was, and knew even better what hunger and poverty were. The Master who has

gone away and left a mere servant a trust fund of two million dollars, apparently with little instruction as to how to use it, has not really gone away. He is still there for the unsuspecting trustee to see and meet several times a day. And the trustee has an opportunity to serve the rich and powerful master by serving the poor and powerless who now stand in the master's stead.

But the trustee cannot do that without taking an awful risk. In the Judgment of the nations those who in feeding the poor fed Jesus did not really know what they were doing. They did it out of compassion, not out of calculation. Put the two parables together. Imagine that one of the trustees takes what the master has given him and, instead of investing it with the bankers, goes out to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. When the master comes, he has nothing to show for it. What do you think the master will say? Or suppose another of the trustees, precisely because this is the master's money and must be protected, takes the money and invests it, and when the master returns tells him that he has protected this investment from all these lazy, hungry, naked folk who wanted part of it, and here is the original investment plus a hundred percent profit. What do you think the master will say?

Perhaps the reason why these two passages stand back-to-back in the Gospel of Matthew is precisely that, without the Judgment of the nations, we are likely to interpret the Parable of the Talents in such a way as to make us guards rather than stewards. If we read the Parable of the Talents by itself and take it to mean that we are to manage whatever it is that God has given us so that it becomes more and that anything that might seem to diminish it is unfaithful

stewardship, most likely we shall end up being guards rather than stewards. This has often been the temptation of the church, with the result that in many cases it has become more and more wealthy, but less and less faithful.

If, on the other hand, we read the Parable of the Talents in the light of the Judgment of the Nations, it follows that the most faithful thing we can do with what God has given to us is to give it away, to use it in the service of the absent master who is present in the poor, the hungry, and the needy. The "bankers" with whom good stewards invest what has been trusted to them-money, time, abilities, are not those that will necessarily yield the greatest return, but those in whose service we serve the absent master.

And what is true of individual stewards must also be true of the church. A church that justifies its own accumulation of wealth under the excuse that it is the Lord's money may be a very good guardian of its funds but is probably not a very good steward of God's gifts. Along these lines, one of the most common tenets in Christian teaching during the first few centuries was that "the wealth of the church is the patrimony of the poor." Initially, this meant that whatever the church had must be at the disposal of the poor and those in need. It was on the basis of this doctrine, for instance, that St. Ambrose melted the sacred vessels of the church and used the proceeds to ransom those who had been made captives of the Goths. Slowly, however, Christian leaders found a way around the radical implications of this doctrine by declaring that, while the wealth of the church is the patrimony of the poor, the poor do not know how to manage it, and the church does it on their behalf. Still, it is significant that this point of

doctrine, so common in early Christian preaching, is so seldom heard from our pulpits today. Perhaps it is because we have become so accustomed to reading the Parable of the Talents by itself and have become so careful with how we manage our talents, that we are like that third servant, who feared his master, refused to take risks, and was quite content with returning what he had received. But we know what the master said to that servant. And we know what he will say to those who during this interim of his apparent absence have refused to serve him in those most in need of service.

There is an old Christian story about Martin of Tours, who lived in the fourth century. It is said to have taken place when Martin was a young Christian soldier entering the French city of Amiens. As he passed through the city gates, looking forward to shelter from the cold breeze that was blowing outside, a naked beggar approached him asking for alms. Martin had no money, but he took his cloak, cut it in half, and gave half to the beggar. The story tells us that that night as he slept Martin had a vision in which a beggar wrapped in half a soldier's cloak came to him, and laying on him a nail-pierced hand said to him: "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

When Martin met that beggar at the city gates, he was not alone with the beggar. There too, present in the beggar, was his absent master. And today, when we meet the world's needs at the many crossroads of life, we are not alone with the needy. The master may have gone away, leaving us talents to manage until his return. But, even before his return,

the seemingly absent master is here among us, inviting us to take risks with his talents, risks worthy of a true steward and a friend.