

Matthew 25:14-30

The Image of God

Why do you fear God?

There is an exercise that I have done with people attending Bible studies or confirmation classes, in which I ask people to take a moment and think about their image of God. When or where possible I ask them to write it down or draw it.

So I want to start by asking you to do the same.

Think about your image of God, or if you have a something to draw or write with, feel free to doodle on your bulletin.

When you picture God,

What is that image?

When you hear God's voice in your mind,

What does God's voice sound like?

Has that image or voice changed over the years?

What experiences of life have shaped your image of God?

Hold onto that as we continue to examine the parable of the talents.

When one reads this parable a number of things might come to your attention. One thing we can do is focus on the talents. At that time a talent was money, not what we understand as a person's gift or talent. A talent was a lot of money – each talent a lifetime's worth of wages. So the amount of money given to all three, whether 5, 2, or 1 talent, is a significant amount. This is not a little treasure, it is a lot of wealth. I have to remember that when I read the word slave, as in, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them" (v14).

The man obviously trusted all three with significant amounts of money. All three were given an amount "to each according to his ability." That line, to each according to his ability, was not one I had paid much attention to until this week. The man knew what each was capable of managing and gave according to that. The expectation was different for each one, but there was trust that each could manage that portion of the man's wealth given to him.

We then hear what each did. The first two went off and doubled their money, the third, in fear of the master, buried his. When the man returns home, and asks for an accounting the first two show the results of their efforts and the master says, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trusted in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things: enter into the joy of your master" (v21).

Remember the 'few things' the master is talking about is more money than most people then could make in a life time. If you are like me, the tendency is to think about this in terms of five, two or three hundred dollars rather than millions. And this is part of why Jesus is using this example. People at the time would have understood the immense amount of money that Jesus was talking about and would have been stunned just by the amount of money, and then on top of that, it was put into the hands of slaves. Try to get your mind around the shock value of the parable for those listening, the majority being the poorest of society.

Now the master takes the money from the first two and congratulates them on their initiative and good work, he speaks of trust, and then of entering the joy of the master. The joy of the master. I love those words. Words that seem to be lost as we focus on the actions of the third slave and the reaction of the master.

In contrast to the first two slaves, who seem to be unafraid to take a chance with the master's money and find joy. And if they were afraid went ahead with a plan anyway and experienced joy. The third describes the master like this, "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."

How could this third man have read the master so differently from the first two? A whole lot of questions came to my mind as it reminded me of how children in one family, of the same parents, can have such different experiences of those parents. I continue to hear that in the stories my own siblings share in remembering our mother.

And it is easy for us to get caught up in thinking that maybe the master had treated that third slave differently, or had been cruel to the slave, that there must be some background for this different view of the master. But again, recall that the master had given each of them millions of dollars. Yes, the third only had one million compared to the others, but this was still a significant amount to be trusted with. And you don't give to people you don't trust. So, the master trusted the slave and gave to him according to the slave's ability.

In thinking about that, could it be that somehow the image of the master had been distorted by the slave, tainted by his own life experience that may have had nothing to do with the master? And sure enough, when the master hears that the slave has done nothing, the slave is called out as wicked and lazy. What he has is taken from him and given to the others, and the slave ends up with nothing, called worthless, and thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. One of the

Bible's favorite images for 'not good'. All of the slave's worst fears come true and the image of a harsh master is reinforced.

When pulling out a scripture passage a few verses at a time on a Sunday morning, it is easy to forget the context of that scripture. This parable of the talents comes at a specific and planned point in the Gospel of Matthew, and that is noteworthy. Jesus is talking about end times, and he is journeying with his disciples to Jerusalem where he knows his life is going to end. He is facing his own end time. Placed in that context, the way we see the master is significant, as the master is a metaphor for God.

This parable is asking us to not only look at how we use the abilities each of us is given in living out our lives, and about how we learn and stretch and grow in those abilities, but also importantly this scripture is about our image of God.

Go back to the image of God that you had in your mind at the beginning of this sermon. How did you envision God? Is God a harsh judge ready to punish you for things you have done wrong? Or is God kind, loving, filled with grace and forgiving? Understanding of your humanity?

Is your image based on your own father, or a fatherly figure, and has that been a help or a hindrance in your understanding of who God is in your own life? I ask this as at one time people mainly seemed to imagine an old man with a long white beard, with a big booming voice, whose personality would resemble their own father. My last confirmation class suggested with laughter that God's voice had to be like that of actor Morgan Freeman.

But seriously, how you envision God is likely how you experience God. I am finding that more and more people are imagining a much more expansive image of God, one that goes beyond an image of a person. But the way you envision God is yours, there is no right answer here.

Still, and going back to the parable, just as the first two slaves were able to step out and take a chance, experience much and be trusted with much, then be welcomed by a joyful master, and the third buried the money, lived in fear, and got what he expected from the master, what we think about God will determine our relationship with God and often with others.

I said that we must consider this passage in terms of its context, where it is situated in the Gospel, but it is also part of an overall story of God's relationship with God's people. The New Testament in particular is the revelation of our God who loves, forgives, redeems, and offers grace to all who would call God their master, father, friend. For those who cannot use those terms because of the connotation attached to them in our modern times, God is Immanuel, God with us. God is redeemer, the one who forgives and restores. God is a God of relationship, who loves and cherishes you and all people.

My hope is that your image of God is one, or becomes one that reveals the kindness, goodness, grace, love, and forgiveness that is offered to you and each person through the saving work of Jesus Christ on a cross. If you need to re-imagine God, let me encourage you to do so. And as each of us grows in our understanding and love of God may our image of God be transformed, and our living out our lives reflect our God of love. Amen.