

Thank you to Jan Lyle and Benjy Lowry for sharing a “stewardship minute” this morning. Jan told us about her move from Alaska to Maine with her husband and how St. Thomas became their spiritual home in large part because of St. Thomas’ spiritual gifts of hospitality and welcome. Benjy reminded us of the welcome and nurture that his family, especially his children, receive from others in the congregation and that that is one of the qualities that keep them coming back for more.

And so what can we say about these readings today that might keep us “coming back for more”? What can we make of this third, terrified servant who we encounter in the Gospel reading? Is he living in paralyzing fear because he is afraid of losing the master’s money? Or is afraid of the harsh and unreasonable master? Why is he so afraid?

There seems to be no obvious reason.

- The other two servants had no indication of fear, though they were entrusted with much more money.
- The landowner demonstrates enormous trust in his servants. Not only does he give them considerable sums to invest, they are given freedom to make investments as they see fit. And the owner returns only, “after a long time”.
- And the landowner rejoices in the success of the first two servants, saying, “*Well done! Enter into the joy of your master!*”

We may never really know the answer to why the third servant is fearful but I wonder if part of the reason is that he has a distorted image of the landowner?

More often than not, this parable has been read either as a warning against laziness in light of the landowner’s (Christ’s) eventual return or as an exhortation to be actively preparing for the day of reckoning when all accounts will be settled. And I wonder...I wonder instead if this might be a warning about how we picture God, about how we imagine the God who wants to interact with us?

Maybe Matthew realizes that it’s probably a good idea to remember what God is actually like and how our impressions of God affect us and shape our actions on a day to day basis. Perhaps, Matthew is offering a warning, a warning of “what you see is what you get”.

If we imagine God mainly as stern, angry, and dispensing harsh justice, we’ll likely come to believe that everything bad in our lives is a punishment from God. If we see God as arbitrary and capricious, that’s what we will experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations. But if we view God primarily in terms of grace, one who empowers and entrusts and frees, then we will regularly be surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. When we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God’s love in our own lives and to share it with others.

How many of us are hurting by a distorted picture of God. Here’s a different picture: one shaped by the sacrificial love we see in Jesus. At a clergy continuing education event with Sam Wells this past week, we were reminded that the story of faith is not about us, but about God. Christ’s death on the cross, a death that doesn’t make it possible for God to love and forgive us, but

demonstrates that God loves and forgives us already. The God we see in Jesus is not, it turns out, “*a harsh God, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed,*” but is always giving more than we expect or deserve and gathering what we offer back in joy.

Today, we do just that; we offer our pledges for the coming year with gratitude and joy. We are setting aside our first fruits, recognizing that everything ultimately is sheer gift from God. This is a profoundly sacred act that we participate in today as we offer our wealth, our works, and our wisdom to the God who gave us everything. God is a God of love, who entrusts us with profound gifts and riches, who is eager for us to make the most of them, and inviting us always to *enter the joy of our Lord*. As Bishop Rickel said, “We’re all in!”

At the offertory we’ll sing what I consider to be the ultimate stewardship Hymn: “As those of old their first fruits brought” #705

*3 With gratitude and humble trust
we bring our best to thee
to serve thy cause and share thy love
with all humanity.
O thou who gavest us thyself
in Jesus Christ thy Son,
help us to give ourselves each day
until life's work is done.*

The Rev. Paul Briggs
25th Sunday After Pentecost, November 19, 2023
St. Thomas’ Church, Camden