

“Pilgrims All”

Judge 4: 1-7; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 19, 2023, 25th Sunday after Pentecost, dedicated to the family of Lola Davis Edwards as they grieve her passing, to our 2023 Lay Leader Award recipients, Steven Sterrett, Deborah Melton Anderson and Jon Mac Anderson, and always to the glory of God!

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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Context and language really matter. How often have you considered the context of a story when you are reading the words that have been placed on the page? For example, when Elie Wiesel wrote *Night*, giving voice to his experience as a Jewish child in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, he was articulating for the very first time, the trauma of the concentration camps – ten years after he had been liberated. His context was one of freedom, but his experience was a shared experience in which over 6,000,000 Jews died at the hands of the Nazis. It was Night. It was utter trauma.

Similarly, how often have YOU considered context and language when telling a story? For example, when you tell this story next Saturday evening, the context and language matters. It will go something like this. **“Our Buckeyes went into the Big House and put a beat down on the Wolverines. We are truly #1.”** A Buckeye is a tree. A Wolverine is an animal and what and where

is “The Big House?” Most people outside of Ohio and the state up North and certainly outside the religion of College Football, would wonder what you are talking about. Are you following me – so far?

When Jesus delivers his second to last parable in Matthew’s Gospel, his context and language really matter. This scene appears in the middle of Matthew 25 as part of a swirl of scenes that sweep Jesus out of the safety of Bethany and into the troubled city of Jerusalem. And then into Pontius Pilate’s presence and then onto to the cross and his death – a death he has predicted long before Good Friday arrives.

Just three chapters ago in Matthew, Jesus was engaged in **arguments** with people. The arguments were sometimes respectful, sometimes not. The arguments mostly involved other religious leaders trying to trip-up and push around our Savior. But he was still arguing and arguing about what really mattered – the heart of God’s law – the Torah – and human responsibility in the face of human need and greed. And we must remember – Jesus’ arguments bind him forever to the whole of continuing Jewish history.

Then things change. In Matthew 23, Jesus moves from arguing with the Scribes and Pharisees to **criticizing** them. He criticizes them – not because they are too strict and inflexible -- but because they are **ONLY** strict and inflexible **with their words**. They say hard words about God’s law and the way to live, but they don’t live into actions which reflect true obedience to the Torah itself. I have encountered the **ONLY** strict and inflexible many times in my ministry and life. How about you?

The law (Torah) calls people to love and to serve – and the Scribes and Pharisees only seek to have people listen to them and do what they are told. In others, do what I say, not what I do. That doesn’t work for Jesus. Jesus says, “NO WAY.” He says their rules which they love spewing are not lived by them. He calls them hypocrites. He calls them snakes. He calls them blind fools and he blames them for the death of all the prophets of Israel and Judah.

By the time we get to Matthew 25:14-30, the context of this parable really matters. Jesus' arguments turned to direct criticism have brought him to rant and rave in the Temple of Jerusalem, to flip the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple's entrance and to promise sharp and severe divisions among people and families and the destruction of the city of Jerusalem.

If you have been listening to Matthew 23 and 24 and the opening parable about the wedding feast in Mathew 25:1-13, you can see Jesus is still dripping with sweat in the Temple and all revved-up and ready for confrontation when he delivers this parable about talents. Even this parable ends with wailing and gnashing of teeth and the one slave being thrown into the outer darkness. (Is it any wonder we have been having a hard time saying, "Thanks be to God for the word of God in recent weeks?")

Jesus has set up a battleground as he delivers this parable and the next one – his final one about sheep and goats and the Kingdom of Heaven – which will end our readings in the Gospel of Matthew next Sunday.

If we found this parable in any other section of the Gospel, we would say that it is a parable of making good investments, trusting your instincts to share generously, and being a good steward. But that is not what is happening here. There is something else going on. Jesus is telling another story as he is standing inside the gates of Jerusalem and teaching about what really matters. Actually – as he is preparing to die. Context and language for this parable is everything.

All the swirling activity spins the scene for this story. This story foreshadows the obscenity and darkness of Jesus' crucifixion. The master, Pilate and the Romans in the greater story of Jesus' fate, abuse power the same way the master in this parable abuses his power over his slaves. Both can do whatever they want, whenever they want because both are masters lording over their slaves – Pilate over Palestine, the master over his three slaves.

So, I feel like we have been softening and twisting this story for our own purposes for a long, long time. Our lectionary brings it up during

Stewardship season and we too often present it as a story about servants and the head of the household. But the Greek is clear. The word is **NOT servant** (“Doo-long”). The word is “**Doulos**” which means “**slave.**” These three men are slaves.

In case you haven't noticed the truth of history, slaves are different than servants. No matter how bad the working conditions are, servants work FOR someone for pay (often not good and equitable pay). Slaves are counted as property owned by the master. Slavery is wrong because human beings must NEVER be owned. Human beings are properly free and any social system which denies this freedom is an offense against creation and our God and our Creator.

This master has full freedom of movement and vast wealth. His leftover possessions are so trifling that he entrusts what amounts to 144 years of a laborer's wages to his three slaves – more than a common working family would earn in seven generations. Have you ever tried to guess what your family earned from their hard work going back seven generations? The sad but true fact is that for some of us in this room, seven generations back – our families WERE slaves. Others among us were indentured servants, coal miners, factory workers, or farmers working on someone else's land. Most of us can't even trace our family lineage back seven generations – let alone say what our family's incomes were. **May I remind you – this was the Master's leftover income?** His “play money” was given to his slaves who had never been given one day's wages for their all labors.

Context – my friends – Jesus is really angry when he presents this parable of injustice. Whatever happens next is a commentary on the injustice itself.

This is not a metaphor. This is an economics lesson about the abuse of a master over a slave from beginning to end. And this “master” is cruel. He is not cool and sharing at all. As one commentator wrote 15 years ago (before Donald Trump was our 45th President) about this parable, “*This master makes Donald Trump look like Mr. Rogers*” (Richard Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel of*

Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, OH, 2007, p. 266).*

Isn't that a prophetic comment considering our current times?

With the Roman Empire as the Master in this parable and the boot on the neck of the people is the tyrannical truth of this parable, then it is important to note that shortly after Jesus' death and before Matthew's gospel was printed and distributed, the armies of the Master ROME left Palestine for a while. Like the Master, the Roman army left for a far land for a while – leaving the enslaved people of Jerusalem to fend for themselves. While they were away, a major Revolt happened, and the people took back their land. But when the master army returned, they crushed the revolt and *crucified tens of thousands of rebels* – **to go with the tens of thousands of Jews they crucified in Jesus' generation as well.** Then they burned the Temple to the ground – casting the God of Abraham and Jacob into the outer darkness. This story is chiseled into the Arch of Titus in Rome which shows the large menorah of the temple being carried into Rome as booty from the destruction.

Masters and slaves. The “good” slave is one who makes more money for the master in this game of investing the master's leftover possessions. He takes a great risk. And he brings all the money back to the master. He doesn't benefit one cent from his efforts. The same is true for the second slave. The “bad” slave is the one who takes no risks and buries the talents. In a sense, he is playing it safe – since he will still be a slave when the master returns. Understandable – considering the context.

But the greater issue is this. No relationship between a master and a slave is okay in any way, shape, or form. It is a power abuse relationship, because no human being should ever OWN another human being – ever! Everything that follows that foundation makes what happens next wrong – forever!

So how do we apply this parable about masters and slaves to our lives?

First, let's remember, Jesus is really angry when he delivers this. He is mad about religious people and religious leaders who say one thing and do another. We are faced with such hypocrisy today – in a number of contexts of our own.

There are so many stories swirling around the sexual and abuse of teens and children by men who call themselves “good Christians.” I, for one, am angry and sickened deeply by such behaviors which harm children, teens and often women. These stories stretch from central Ohio throughout our nation and world. They are repulsive and disgusting, and people involved need to be prosecuted for their behaviors. Worse than the actions themselves are stories of churches and supporters who blow off these stories. And we hear those as well from bishops on down to the people in the pews.

It is no wonder Jesus got angry at hypocrites in his times! We should be as angry about such master-slave relationships and such hypocrisy in our time.

Second, we need to see the crushing effect of master-slave power relationships and relationships which Lord over and uses power over and against people. They are sick and devastatingly abusive relationships.

As we celebrate Thanksgiving this week, we needn't look further than our own history as Congregationalists to see this effect. When the King of England drove the Congregationalists out of England and they were exiled in Leyden in the Netherlands because they challenged the King's treatment of all who questioned the relationship between King and Church, these Pilgrims did not lose faith in God and one another. They refused to be slaves to the master called King James I (yes - the same **King James** of the King James Bible who intentionally miswrote and thus misinterpreted this parable).

As our forebearers bravely prepared to head to New England and establish themselves as free people in a new land, Pastor John Robinson offered these words to his church on the eve of their departure in September 1620:

“We are now ere long to part asunder, and the Lord knows whether ever we shall live to see one another’s faces. But whether the Lord has appointed it or not, I charge you before God and His blessed angels, follow me no further than I follow Christ (words which every pastor should have emblazoned on his or her office door) and if God shall reveal anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry. For I am confident the Lord has more truth and light to break forth from His holy word...”

... Keep in mind our church covenant, our promise and covenant with God and one another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from His written word. But take heed of what you receive for truth – examine it well and compare and weigh it with other Scriptures of truth before you receive it. It is not possible that the Christian world should so lately come out of such thick anti-Christian darkness, and that the perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.”

Are you listening to this? **Follow me no further than I follow Christ and may more truth and light break forth on God’s Holy Word!** These are powerful guides. What a preacher! IF only we were all pilgrims!

Context and language really matter!

As Jesus faced his final days of his life on earth, he needed people to understand that the master-slave relationship is never right and no matter what the three slaves do, the master acts with greed and cruelty – greed in relation to the investments made for him and cruelty toward the one who simply saves what he has been given.

We are called to resist and fight abusive relationships – no matter how we encounter them. We are called to work for equity and fairness everywhere for everyone. As John Robinson addressed and blessed his pilgrim band of believers 403 years ago, we are called to be people of the covenant, people who live in relationship with God, who follow Christ (even when those

around us don't) and ones who seek to be witnesses to the breaking forth of God's light and truth in this world.

We are all called to be Pilgrims on this journey of life!

That is the context of our lives of faith and this parable is a gift from God to support Jesus' Way. Thanks be to God. Amen.

* I have drawn from Richard Swanson's commentary of Matthew 25:14-30 in *Provoking the Gospel of Matthew: A Storyteller's Commentary* in the crafting of this sermon.

