

What 'Rescue' Means in God's Economy
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Nov. 16, 2008

Scripture: Psalm 123: 1-2
Matthew 25:14-30

I don't know about you but I am getting much more than my recommended daily allowance of high finance in the news.

With the elections over, it seems a large chunk of the news media has turned its attention back to the global financial crisis, and they are trying desperately to make sense of what happened. The only trouble is the average consumer of news needs at least an MBA if not a PhD to make all the connections.

We are experiencing the result of 20 years of financial engineering and consumer behavior. It's not easily explained and, the more the media try, it can get downright oppressive at times. The typical news broadcast goes something like this:

"Our lead story is the global financial crisis"

Then, later: "Our second story is the fallout of the global financial crisis on the economy and the markets."

Then, finally: "Our final story is how the impact of the global financial crisis is affecting individuals and families across America."

It's not just the volume of reporting – it's the language and vocabulary. Last week, while waiting in the carpool line, I heard an hour-long interview with a New York Times reporter. She was explaining a fundamental concept – that people with money were simply trying to make more money.

She said, simply, that credit default swaps failed to hedge certain tranches of collateralized debt obligations in the securitization markets, resulting in the extreme volatility across asset classes in the capital markets.

Got that? Here, let me say it again: Credit default swaps failed to hedge certain tranches of collateralized debt obligations in the securitization markets, resulting in the extreme volatility across asset classes in the capital markets. And we wonder how we got in trouble.

Then there are the acronyms.

I'm sure you've heard the official name of the giant, \$700-billion bailout Congress passed a few weeks ago. It's the Troubled Asset Rescue Plan, or TARP. We've got a problem, a big one. Let's throw a TARP over it.

This past week the debate intensified over whether the TARP money ought to go directly to homeowners who can't pay their mortgage or to the banks who made the mortgage loans that now can't be paid.

So, with all these questions swirling around about who should be rescued and how, we are given this week's lectionary text from the gospel of Matthew. It is the parable of the talents, a story about a master who gave large amounts of money to three servants with the expectation that they would invest it and earn him even more money.

Perhaps you've heard the admonition about scripture – that it ought to come with the same kind of warning label you might find on a box of dynamite: “Handle with extreme caution.” I find that to be especially true with Jesus' parables.

Christ knew the art of story-telling, of allegory and analogy, and his parables gave his followers a lot to think about. His parables communicated certain truths about God with direct precision. But they come with some risk. We should not take any one or two or three of Christ's parables and think we can wring out of them total knowledge of our sovereign God.

With that caution in mind, we can begin to unpack the parable of the talents.

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The story goes as follows. Before setting out on a long journey, a rich man entrusts his wealth to three servants.

Now what scripture refers to as a “talent” was a LOT of money, the equivalent of 15 years of a laborers' wages. Based on today's minimum wage, that would be about \$200,000. So, five talents would be a million dollars and three talents \$600,000.

Now, apparently the rich man, the master, had a reputation for being a tough and rather unscrupulous businessman. Scripture says he reaped where he did not sow and he gathered crops he did not plant.

Two of the servants knew the master would expect his money to make more money. So, they got busy. They did well, doubling the master's money. Scripture doesn't mention whether they used structured investment vehicles to buy collateralized debt obligations made up of high-risk subprime mortgages.

Whatever they did, it worked. They doubled their master's money. Upon his return, the master was pleased with their results and rewarded them handsomely.

But there was a third servant who was not nearly as entrepreneurial. He was a fearful man, afraid to put the master's money at risk. So he did nothing with it. Made no investments, bought no businesses. He didn't even have the courage to open a low-interest savings account at the bank or buy a federally insured certificate of deposit.

So the master took back what he had given that servant and he banished him from his household.

This parable can leave us scratching our heads for a variety of reasons.

"Who does the master represent?" we might ask.

"What is Christ telling us?"

And what about this puzzling sentence in verse 29:

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

What kind of paradigm for social justice is that?

Sometimes it's as helpful to define what something is not as it is to define what it is.

I think we can say with some confidence that the master does not represent God. Nothing we know about God suggests the profile of one who is harsh, unfair and even unethical, as the master is described in his business dealings.

In turn, because the master is not symbolic of God, it seems equally clear that we can say this story is NOT about judgment ... and what the servants did or did not do is not a forecast of whether they will receive God's salvation.

So what is this parable about?

As always, it helps to look at the text in context. What is Matthew trying to accomplish with his account of the gospel. And, where does this story fall in the order of the events of Christ's life?

Matthew's gospel shows many signs that it was written in particular for the Jews of Christ's day. Matthew drives hard to make the point that Jesus is the messiah, God incarnate for all, the New Covenant, and that the followers of Christ are the true Israel.

For these reasons, many scholars have concluded that Christ in Matthew is making a point about how the Jews have handled God's gift of the Law, as it was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and lengthened through the centuries into a highly legalistic set of rules.

Jesus is saying the Jews had misused the gift of God's love in the form of the Old Covenant, depending too much on rules, legalism and human judgment to decree who gets to belong to the temple or enter into the kingdom of God.

Perhaps Jesus is saying that, over the generations, the Jews had misused the law to be exclusive of others rather than extending God's love inclusively. In effect, then, perhaps Jesus is saying the Jews had been like the servant who hid the talent he had been given in the ground, rather than taking it out into the world to share and invest and multiply.

To be sure, we should not take that interpretation and twist it into some flavor of modern-day anti-Jewish sentiment. To do that would be to commit our own act of misusing God's gift of scripture.

But this interpretation can shed light on some additional thoughts about who Jesus was and what Jesus accomplished for all of God's people. This story comes late in Matthew's account of Christ's life. Time is drawing short. Soon, Christ will be on his way for the last time to Jerusalem and to the cross.

Perhaps, then, Christ is encouraging us to follow the model of the first two servants, who took all they had been given into the world and made the most of it. Christ himself is the gift, the very manifestation of God's love and grace, and Christ wants his followers to extend the gift of God's love and grace and justice to others.

We can claim, in our own way, that we know what it is to receive God's bounty of grace, can't we? We have been given great gifts in these last two years, haven't we?

This beautiful old church campus. So many new relationships that have come to mean so much to us. The joy and energy we feel in worship and the inspiration it gives us to serve God here and in the mission field. The hope we have. The opportunity to be something new and different in our city's faith community.

Like the servant entrusted with the master's talents, we have indeed been given much. Like the servant, Christ calls us to multiply what we have been given, to take all that we have and use it to extend the love and grace of God to others.

Your response to our stewardship campaign indicates you want to do just that. To date, your financial commitments represent a 47% increase over last year's final result. You pledged your time and talent with equal generosity.

Surely that is the kind of response to God's love that Jesus sought to encourage in telling this parable – to take what we have been given and to add to it our own talents in order to multiply it.

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It seems a safe bet that, for now anyway, the world beyond these walls will continue to be shaped by certain rules and laws. The laws of gravity – what goes up must come down. The economic law of supply and demand. The rules of capitalism, which works well until it runs aground, as it has just now, on the rocks of excess and greed and bad judgment.

Maybe not right away, but investors will put capital at risk again. They will take their modern-day 'talents' and try to earn more. They will take their chances. Some may do well. Others may not.

For those who fail, there may even be another government rescue plan, but it will only come after a great deal of loss and pain and even then there will be no guarantee.

Those are the rules of the worldly economy.

But God's economy is different.

In God's economy of grace, the rescue comes first. It is already in place. It is limitless and unconditional, underwritten and guaranteed by the life, death and resurrection of Christ the messiah, the New Covenant.

Confident in this assurance, God calls us to act boldly and to invest our talents wisely to take God's grace out into the world and to be signs of God's kingdom to come.

May God grant us the wisdom and the courage to do just that, until we are greeted by our master with the words: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant Enter into the joy of your master.”

Amen