

## “A CAUTIONARY TALE TOLD ASKEW”

A Sermon for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, November 19, 2017

Text: Matthew 25:14-30

A “cautionary tale” is a story with a bad ending which reinforces a rule or taboo by making us cautious. Someone in the story does something they shouldn’t have, and suffers exaggerated consequences for their lapse. Some cautionary tales are folktales, like Pinocchio—“if you tell a lie your nose might grow longer and longer like his.” Movies or novels may have a similar dynamic. Sometimes news is reported which frighten us just like the old tales. “See what happened to the boy who left his bicycle in the yard!” Whether made up or actual, the point of a cautionary tale is that we should watch out or the same thing will happen to us. It makes use of fear as a motivation for proper behavior. Often the consequences seem out of proportion to the misdeed, so that our fear gets heightened, leading to (perhaps excessive) caution.

On the face of it, the parable we read today is a cautionary tale. None of us wants to wind up cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, like the man who buried the money entrusted to him. If we were a little bit worried already about being good in Jesus’ absence, after hearing this cautionary tale we will be super anxious!

Which is hilarious, if you have been following Jesus at all. You know that he found the hyper-cautious “obedience-ism” of the Pharisees way over the top. They tried desperately not to offend God. They wanted to be found doing exactly the right thing all the time. Jesus cringed when he noticed that they even gave God a tithe of their spices.

Jesus told this parable not to make people wary of taking risks. Jesus wants us to “take a chance on love”! He doesn’t want us to freeze the assets he

commits to us and ignore the needs of others! He wants us to be profligate in our giving! Jesus coined the phrase “I hope you dance!”

Think about the sort of things Jesus taught his disciples to do. They all involved bearing the burdens of others: taking up a cross, losing oneself for others, sharing all one has (think of the widow’s two cent gift to the temple, or his instruction to the rich young ruler), loving your enemies (how risky is that!), letting go of what people owe you (i.e., forgiving), and on and on. To live for others, to spend one’s time praising and living for God, to suffer and not seek revenge, these give Christian life overall a very dangerous shape. His disciples tried to tell Jesus it wasn’t a good idea to go to Jerusalem, and he went anyway. Turns out they were right, but Jesus was not born to be safe. He was born to bear the suffering of others.

This parable, then, is the opposite of a “cautionary” tale. The upshot is not that we should worry, but that we should not. We are to be brave, bold, risk-takers, in our following Jesus.

Cautionary tales encourage avoidant behaviors. Stay out of the woods. Don’t tell lies. Watch out for certain situations. But in this story, it is the person who is careful who gets punished! The two who took risks get rewarded. Their incautious behavior of “investing” what didn’t even belong to them, in the absence of the owner, is rewarded—they had been slaves, now they will be in charge.

Let me retell the story.

A rich man decides to take a long trip, he doesn’t know how long, let’s say, to China. He calls in three people who are so indebted to him, they are slaves.

They are not free people, they don't own stuff. He calls them into his office and opens the safe. He takes out bundles of hundred-dollar bills, and hands them to the men before closing his briefcase and Ubering to the airport.

Notice: He does not tell them what to do. He doesn't say it is their money. (They know better.)

This is a risky situation. They didn't ask for it. There is opportunity, sure, but also danger. What do they do?

One of them buys a failing fast food franchise and turns it around. Another enrolls in a high-priced university to earn a teaching degree. But the third one, he is careful. He suspects he is being watched. He doesn't even buy Treasury bonds. He sews the money into his mattress and goes about his life as though it had never happened. As though he had never been entrusted with a valuable, possibly fate-changing commodity.

Some time later, their "owner" returns. First slave says, "How about this restaurant! I did all this with your money!" And the master says, "Wow! You need more to do." Same with the second. He shows the master the results of his investing, and the master is impressed, and doubles the ante.

But the third? With the third, the master is disappointed. He gets a sermon. And he is punished. Way out of proportion to his simple error, which was only to be over cautious.

This parable looks like a cautionary tale, because of what happens to the careful slave. Except that the whole point is not to be careful, not to live as though you are afraid of God; and not to anxiously conserve resources so that you preserve your own skin.

God gives us gifts without instructions. God is on a long journey. But the gifts we receive from God, even though they are considerable, and even though we can't see God, still belong to God. He wants us to not be careful with those gifts, but to be generous.

Live vigorously. Love abundantly. Share without measure. Give without expecting return. Invite not just people you like to supper, but ask the poor to your banquet. Forgive debts, forgive sins, forgive trespasses. Let it go! Don't always look for something to make you happy—be happy for somebody else's good fortune! And commiserate with those who are sad!

This is not a parable about investment, or about caution, or about what a scary God we have. This is a cautionary tale turned on its head. Told askew.

You and I are set free in Christ, through the forgiveness of our sins and the act of manumission by which we are liberated from sin and death, from all the consequences of the sin we have sinned. We are turned loose in this world with a profusion of gifts, amazing gifts, in a beautiful world, with people all around us.

God wants more from us than fastidious self-protective righteous behavior. God wants us to play with the money he gives us, recognizing all the while that we owe it all to God. We are not our own, we belong to God. In Christ, it is established once and for all that God's "owning" us is not a terrifying fact which should make us cautious. It is a gracious and loving "owning."

If our faith in God were constituted by a legal relation in which we anticipate a final judgment in which our output will be measured against God's goodness to us, then we would indeed read this parable as a cautionary tale. We should be afraid, very afraid, because only if we return double to God on all he has given us can we know peace; and if we fail we shall be cast out.

But our faith in God is not constituted by a legal relation, but precisely by the gift/promise relation you see in this parable, in which God's delight is to raise the lowly, bless us with his gifts, and bestow on us the benefits which fall on all who love God. The

slave who interpreted God as harsh, demanding, and unfair—bore no fruit. But the two who saw the premise of our relationship to God as promise-based, gift-based, gospel-based—they lived, loved, ventured, they were incautious. They bore fruit and were happy. Which was Jesus’ whole point—that we enter into God’s joy. Amen.

