

Putting the Master's Resources to Work

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
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Children's Story

Have you heard of Ebenezer Scrooge? Charles Dickens wrote about him in a famous story called, "A Christmas Carol."

Scrooge was a rich man. But he was not a generous man. He had lots of money. But he did nothing with it. He loved his money. He counted his money. But he did not spend his money. Not on himself. Not on anyone else.

Hungry people who begged Scrooge for help received nothing. They went away hungry. Men who worked for Scrooge worked for whatever small amount he could get away with paying them. On dark winter days, they worked with little light and with less heat. Candles and coal cost money after all.

How strange! To have a large pile of money, but to do nothing with it. To hoard it. To count it. To guard it. But never to spend it. Not in good ways. Not even in bad ways.

Only after a long, terrifying night, with visits from several ghosts – only then did Scrooge see that all his money was not for hoarding and for counting and for guarding. That money was not for piling up. That money was to be used.

After his terrifying night, Scrooge did just that. He used his money. Used it to do good.

Everyone who knew him was surprised. Scrooge was surprised. But he was happy, too. That's probably what surprised him most of all.

Imagine: having a great big pile of money and doing nothing good with it at all. How strange!

Zephaniah 1:7,12-18 (NRSV)

Be silent before the Lord God! For the day of the Lord is at hand; the Lord has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests. . . . At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, "The Lord will not do good, nor will he do harm." Their wealth shall be plundered, and their houses laid waste. Though they build houses, they shall not inhabit them; though they plant vineyards, they shall not drink wine from them.

The great day of the Lord is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the Lord is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the Lord's wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth.

Sermon

Zephaniah was not a happy prophet. (Are there any happy prophets?) Zephaniah did not have a happy message. Oh, there's a happy ending. But there's a lot of gloom and misery and judgment along the way. The heart of Zephaniah 1 might be expressed this way:

All creation is doomed!

The people of God are doomed!

God is angry, and there's no getting around it!

God is angry, in particular, about this: about the comfortable, apathetic complacency of his people. His people who say, in effect, “It doesn’t matter what we do with what we have. God doesn’t really care one way or the other. We can sit on top of it all – like Job on top of that hill of dung – we can sit on top of it all and do nothing. We can just go through the motions of faithfulness.” God, according to Zephaniah, is not about to stand for that. Keep Zephaniah in mind while we turn to Matthew 25 and Jesus.

Matthew 25:14-30

[Jesus said, The kingdom of heaven] will be like a man going on a journey, who called his slaves and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to a third one, each in proportion to his ability. Then he went away.

The one who had received the five talents went off at once, put them to work, and made another five. In the same way, the one with the two talents made another two. But the one who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole, and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing another five talents. He said, “Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made another five talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave. You were trustworthy with a little, I am going to put you in charge of a lot. Come, share your master’s joy.”

Then the one with the two talents came forward. He said, “Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made another two talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave. You were trustworthy with a little, I am going to put you in charge of a lot. Come, share your master’s joy.”

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward. He said, “Master, I knew you to be a demanding person, reaping where you haven’t sown, gathering where you haven’t scattered seed. So I was afraid and went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.” In reply his master said to him, “You worthless, lazy slave! You knew that I reap where I haven’t sown and that I gather where I haven’t scattered? Then you should have put my money in the bank, so that when I came I could get back what’s mine with interest!”

“Take the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents. More will be given to the one who has, and he will have an abundance. But the one who doesn’t have? Even what he does have will be taken away. Now throw this useless slave into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Sermon (continued)

Let me make some general comments on Matthew 25 before turning to the heart of the matter.

First, the parable is a message from Jesus to Israel. Jesus tells a lot of stories about a master or a king who goes away and then returns. It’s tempting for us to think that those stories are about Jesus going away and returning, but they’re not – not first of all. Those stories are about the God of Israel, who left at the time of the exile (Ezekiel saw the glory of the LORD departing from the temple) and who came back through Jesus (Jesus is named Immanuel, which means “God is with us”).

Today’s story is this: *God left you, Israel, hundreds of years ago. But before he left, treasure was placed in your hands. Now God has come back to see what you have done with that treasure.* The treasure in question would be the Law of Moses, the priesthood and the sacrifices, the covenant and its promises, and especially the covenant with its overarching purpose. “Israel,” the story asks, “what have you been doing with these treasures?”

Second, here are some important particulars in the story; they’re worth noting. Notice, first of all, that the treasure was entrusted in ways that fit with people’s management abilities. “To one he gave five talents, to another two, to a third one, each in proportion to his ability” (v. 15a). Pharisees, for example, by temperament, training, and apprenticeship, were equipped to rightly handle the Torah and the oral traditions of Israel. The Scribes, in a similar way, were well-suited to interpret the Law and to keep the

heart of that Law before the people. And the priests, for their part, were well-positioned to offer sacrifices for the people, for their well-being and faithfulness. Treasure is not entrusted to those who lack the ability to handle it well.

Notice, also, that the story envisions positive outcomes. The slave with the five talents – that’s a lot of money – makes five more. And he gets to keep them and, presumably, to keep working with them. And the slave with the two talents – that’s still a lot of money – makes two more. And he gets to keep them and, presumably, to keep working with them. Both of these slaves are rewarded with increased responsibilities and, at the same time, with joy. Joy. I guess that makes Jesus a happy prophet with a happy message!

Finally, notice that the third slave had it all wrong. He misunderstands his master. He’s blind to his master’s generosity. As a result, he never really receives the money that is entrusted to him. He doesn’t take ownership of it or responsibility for it. And so he does nothing with it. He buries it, then gives it back: “Here, you have what’s yours” (v. 25b).

Zephaniah warned Israel about this kind of complacency, about doing nothing with what God had given them. For the first two slaves in Jesus’ story, at least, that was not an issue. They knew that a trust has a purpose, and they committed themselves to that purpose. Jesus’ story asks Israel and its leaders: *Are you using what God entrusted to you for its proper purpose? Are all the families of the earth being blessed through Abraham’s children?* That was the question!

Now we are ready to listen to the story. First of all, yes, Jesus has gone away, and he will be coming back. We don’t know when he will be back . . . some day . . . Meanwhile, we wait in faith. Waiting, however, doesn’t mean sitting down – whether on top of a heap of dung or a heap of treasure – waiting doesn’t mean sitting down and doing nothing. While we wait, we work.

That’s the second thing: our Lord has entrusted treasures to us. These treasures take many forms: imagination and intelligence, compassion and empathy, muscle and creativity, jobs and homes, marriages and families, churches and neighborhoods, and, of course, the Good News – the news about God’s work through Jesus Christ to renew and restore all creation, to create justice and peace and reconciliation. And along with that Good News, there are gifts of theology and doctrine and the testimony of the faithful. And there are gifts of faith, hope, and perseverance. The list goes on and on. We are truly rich.

Which brings us to the third thing. All these treasures are not ours. They have been entrusted to us. They belong to God. Now, a trust has a purpose or a set of purposes. This trust is no different. Some of the purposes are general and perhaps obvious. God entrusts all sorts of things to us, for example, wanting us to use those things to be, above all, decent human beings. To look after the world and our own corner. To be good neighbors. To be loving husbands and wives. To be committed parents and trusting children. To make a difference to the weak, the vulnerable, and the helpless – especially the old and the unborn.

Some of the purposes for the treasures we have, though, are more specific than merely being decent human beings. God entrusts some treasures to us wanting us to use them for his kingdom. The kingdom, by the way, embraces ordinary, decent human life. But there’s more. There’s sharing gospel hope with hurting families. There’s speaking gospel truth to the powerful. There’s taking risks to be peacemakers in a violent world. There’s embodying rhythms of work and rest, of worship and service. And there’s more.

The parable asks us – individually, together, as families, as a church, as a whole community: *What are we doing with what God has entrusted to us? Are we using those treasures in a way that embraces the will of God for our lives and homes, for our neighborhoods and businesses, for our church and for our city?* We’re not just sitting atop a pile of treasure, are we? (By the way, if you’re just sitting on it, piled up treasure is no better than piled up dung!) We’re not just sitting there, are we?

Last, let me turn to something really general and really specific. Suppose that together we had this task: to establish a Reformed, Christian outpost in the city of Columbus. To establish a community that is thoroughly Christian and distinctly Reformed. A community that doesn’t duplicate anything that’s

already here in Columbus. A community that harbors and shares unique perspectives on work and worship, on education and culture, on wealth and poverty, on the kingdom and the world, on salvation and life. And suppose that, along with that task, we had these resources: real estate worth about a million dollars and a core of committed Christians who have been shaped by a Reformed worldview, who have long, collective experience in the city of Columbus, who have a passion for justice, mercy and faithfulness, who have considerable intellectual abilities, who have considerable financial assets, who have a deep love for Jesus and his church, who have a desire to make a difference, and who have no interest in sitting still on top of a pile of dung or treasure or anything else.

Supposing all that, the task and the resources, what shape would that Reformed, Christian outpost in the city of Columbus have? Would it have a building? Would it have a full-time minister? Would it have a Sunday school? Would it focus its attention on the outer suburbs? On the inner suburbs? On the university area? On impoverished neighborhoods? Would the outpost community get together mostly for worship? Mostly for Bible study? Mostly for prayer? Mostly to look after the poor or the homeless? Mostly to confront university culture with the claims of Jesus Christ?

If we were starting from scratch to establish this Reformed, Christian outpost in the city of Columbus, what shape would we give it? Would it look anything like what we look like now as a church? That's the heart of the matter.

God has entrusted so much to us. And with that trust comes a purpose or set of purposes. That purpose, minimally, must be this: that we be decent human beings, that we be thoroughly Christian, and that we be distinctly Reformed. The first two are given. As far as the third, if we're not going to be distinctly Reformed, then we may as well disband and fold into churches in our own neighborhoods – and there are plenty of those to choose from.

So here's the question: *Are we putting the Master's resources to work? Are we administering the trust we have been given with the Master's purposes in mind – that we be decent human beings, that we be thoroughly Christian, and that we be distinctly Reformed?*

In early January, the church council is planning a pair of Sunday morning conversations – on January 4 and 11; adjust your calendar, change your plans, make sure you can be here on one or both of those Sundays! – the council is planning a pair of Sunday morning conversations on the whole *What if we were starting from scratch?* question – *starting from scratch with a lot of resources?* We on the church council think that the question is critical – critical to our future as a church, critical to our calling to be faithful.

I, for one, am facing this process with hope. You see, I never noticed it before, but in today's parable, the accent is on faithfulness, on good outcomes, and on shared joy. That gives me hope, Gospel hope. And why not? Even Zephaniah has a happy ending!