

Parable of the Pounds¹

A key to understanding this parable from Jesus is to pay attention to the opening sentence. It reads that a nobleman went into a far country to receive a kingdom and then returned. It's tempting to slide past this and move on to the behaviors of the servants in handling the pound that is entrusted to them. We learn further that some of his subjects did not like this nobleman and they sent a delegation to wherever he was going to plead with whomever not to empower this man to be their king.

Let's unpack this situation. During Jesus' time they didn't have elections and orderly transfer of power. Every time a king or leader changed there was a power struggle. Every time there was a power vacuum there was uneasiness and maybe violence. What is assumed here is that a nobleman needs to go off to a higher authority—say the Roman emperor—in order to be appointed the king or governor of some area. Such a thing actually happened at about this time. Herod the Great made a trip to Rome in 40 B.C. seeking a Roman appointment as king. Thirty-six years later Herod's son, Archelaus, made a similar journey to argue his case against his half-brother Antipas. Archelaus failed. He was banished and Antipas inherited his father's kingdom.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on November 22, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, GA.

So, Jesus' parable is set in a familiar and anxious situation, namely the tense time when authority is being determined.

The story goes on to describe the nobleman divvying up some of his wealth to his servants. Each of ten of them receives a pound. Their instructions are to trade with the money until the nobleman returns. The text insures us that the nobleman is confident that he's going to come back as the new king, despite the fact that he's not popular at least with some of his prospective subjects who also want to plead with the emperor not to let this guy rule over them.

You've got to wonder what each of the ten servants is really thinking. Do they think that he will really return and collect his money, his money plus, what that money has earned? Or do they think that this guy is going to disappear and some other ruler is going to struggle to the top to reign over them? You see, how they manage the money is really determined by what they think is really going to happen with the leadership question. If they believe in the nobleman and his suitability for leadership and his influence with the emperor, they are going to get out in the market place buying and selling so they have a tidy little bundle to present the new king when he returns. Wouldn't that work well at the point when patronage

appointments are being made? Or do they think that this sometimes unpopular nobleman is going to be a loser, never return and never reclaim his money. Those who were of this mind stow the money away in a handkerchief in the sock drawer hoping that one day it will simply pass into their ownership. In the meantime that servant will pursue his own interests, work on his own farm, save his own money and hope that the nobleman who is off trolling for high office will just disappear. Of course, we know what happens.

This parable brings to light a principle that is worth talking about as we ponder our church's budget and our personal finances. The principle is that our management of the good things, the money and talents, the relationships we have and our time—we manage these things with an eye on what we think is really running the world.

During the American Civil War, every time the Northern Army lost a battle, investors withdrew large sums of money from the banks and markets. There was a constant calculation that wanted to be in the most advantageous position whenever the final shape of the country finally emerged. I like the expression "smart money." The smart money in investing is always tied up with the industry or security that will be doing well in the future.

Maybe the best interpretation of Jesus' parable is that the smart money is always staked on the Kingdom.

Consider how similar our own situation is to those of the imaginary servants that Jesus describes. You and I also live in a world where the final outcome of who is running the show of life is under pretty fundamental dispute. God, Christ, is unseen and there are lots of challenges in our world to God's rightful place. Will secularity and consumerism and the sheer busyness that can fill our days and provide us with endless stimulation and amusement come to be all in all? Will living for self, or achievement, or prestige, or security or the all-consuming hobby completely fill our personal horizon and become the actual worships of our lives. Or alternatively, will God and his Christ with his reign of love which is supposed to be coming into the world really be what eventually come to be established. What we believe the actual outcome to be has an amazing bearing on how we spend our talents.

There's an amazing amount of hope involved every time we drop money in the offering plate. We all know that there are differences in gifts. We might give enough to avoid embarrassment of being ungenerous or cheap. So we drop a dollar in the plate. But to give substantially of our livelihood—which is a good word because we're talking about life here—to give

substantially, is an act crackling with optimism and anticipation. It is to say that we really believe that a kingdom of love is coming. It is to say that Jesus Christ will one day be the center of everyone's devotion. Others will notice and will be filled with hope.

The same is true of our use of time. To do the volunteer thing, to work to build a social service agency, or to provide some relief to the poor or to organize a Bible study or to get skills in helping other like our Stephen ministers is to expend ourselves—our talents really—in a way that says something about what we believe to be most real in life.

To put it starkly, stewardship is a political statement. I'm not talking about democrats or republicans. I'm talking about deep politics, like the politics of what makes the world go round. What values will ultimately prevail. What is ultimately real and good and beautiful? I'm talking about the politics of whether there's a wonderful God who will one day be all in all or whether life is drifting to nowhere and the most powerful are going to run the show. In the big picture, where's the smart money? Think of this as you ponder use of your own gifts. Think of the hope that resides in your generosity. Think of the side you take when you invest in the reign of love, which Christ came to bring.