

Readiness

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“For to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” This is the word of the Lord, thanks be to God?

In his book *Outliers, the Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell describes a phenomenon in Canadian hockey, wherein at the most advanced level of play, 70% of the players have birthdays in the first half of the year. Only 10% of professional hockey players in Canada are born after October 1. There’s hardly anyone in Canadian hockey with a December birthday. Look at any Canadian roster and it holds up. Well a few years ago, a researcher was trying to figure out why this is, and he had a sort of epiphany. Hockey, as you may have heard, is a national obsession in Canada. Kids strap on skates as soon as they can walk, and they start playing in competitive leagues at four years old.

Because there are millions of kids playing, Canadian hockey has developed an elaborate tiered system that the players advance through, and they’re heavily tracked, so that the most promising kids are directed to the more advanced levels. It’s organized as a meritocracy - talent is identified and directed to the best programs and coaches. The kids who succeed at this level, then this level, then this level can be ready for the NHL, ready for the Olympics before they’re out of their teens. So why are there no December birthdays in pro Canadian hockey? Well, the birthday cutoff for enrolling a four-year-old child in a hockey league is January 1. If you’re born in December, everyone else on the team is older than you, and if you’re all in preschool, 6 to 12 months of age difference means a lot in physical development and ability. Kids born in January are likely to be the biggest kids on the team, and identified as the most capable players, therefore tracked to the more advanced level the next year where they get better coaching and more practice. The littler kids are identified as the less talented, and sent to the less rigorous teams the following year. The trend repeats year after year, and does not self-correct, those who are identified as most talented are given better training and opportunities for skill development so that even into the teen years, the players advancing from the junior awesome league to senior awesome league, and then to the pros, are many times more likely to be born in Jan, feb and March than in Oct, Nov. and Dec.

There was a sociologist named Robert Merton who observed phenomena like this in sports, education, business, wherein individuals with an early advantage accumulate more and more advantages over time – and individuals with an early disadvantage rarely catch up – and he gave it a name – the Matthew Effect, which he took from our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Matthew – to those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

Is that right? Was Jesus endorsing unfairness? Was Jesus affirming arbitrary inequality?

Over the past two months, the Occupy movement has been spreading through cities across the United States and around the world – it started in New York as the Occupy Wall Street protests, as activists took to the streets decrying the appallingly disproportionate way that wealth and resources are distributed across American society. You've heard the statistics – that the top 1% percent of Americans have a combined wealth that equals that of the bottom 50%, and wealth seems to be getting even more concentrated; over the past 30 years, the income of the richest Americans has nearly tripled, while the average American's pay has been flat or decreasing.

These are troubling numbers, but it's not just inequality that has people upset. There are many rich people who have made the world a better place, and made their money in the process. The protests are directed at all the rich people who got their money by cheating. Powerful bankers and financial managers made money by committing fraud, profited at the expense of others, got rich by wrecking the economy, and have thus far been insulated and protected from any major consequences for their bad behavior.

Reminds me of the t.v. commercial from a few years ago with two boys eating lunch, and one says to the other, "I'll be your best friend if you give me half your orange juice." The other boy says, "sure," and hands over the glass – the first boy drinks the entire glass in one long gulp. The second boy protests, "You said you wanted half – you drank it all!" And the first kid says, "Well my half was on the bottom."

It's not fair! To many Americans, it seems very much that the fiscal house of our nation is arranged in such a way that certain people are able betray the good faith of the rest of the community, to cheat the system, and get away with it.

Raise your hand if you were thinking of the Occupy movement when I read the words of scripture a few moments ago. To those who have more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. These chilling words come from the mouth of Jesus - does this square with our faith in a God of justice, a God who cares for the poor and the disenfranchised? Is Jesus affirming or acquiescing to the fact of gross disparity? There a biblical mandate for inequality, or is it possible that Jesus is offering a critique of abusive power and a rebuke of inequality, just like he always does, even in this abrasive and uncomfortable story? Let's take a close look.

The parable of the talents begins with the Master giving each of his three servants a large sum of money and then leaving them to do with it what they will. As an image for God, the master is one who owns everything, but who limits his own control, entrusting what is his, to the people around him. The amounts he gives out are not the same from servant to servant – one receives five, the next two and the third one – but even the smallest amount is a great deal of money, and regardless, the money is not a gift for them to keep for themselves. It is a responsibility – they are expected to use the money and bring a return. An opportunity was offered to each of them equally – use and multiply that which has been given to you.

The truth that we are expected to use what we have been given wisely is a challenging one, for sure. As Christians who care about love and justice, we deal with two sides of the same concern. There is always the side that is about the right

and the wrong that we see around us. We're called to speak truth to power, to stand up for the poor, the excluded, the abused, to tell the world about the radical demands of the gospel, for love and justice. And then there's the other side, which isn't about what good or evil other people are doing – it's about us. I have to look at my own life. What am I doing to make the world a better or worse place to live? How am I using my time, my gifts, my words, my dollars? Am I making a difference with what I have? I may not have as much money to throw around, I may not have as powerful a position as some people, but that's not the point. What am I doing for love, peace and justice with what I do have?

In the parable of the talents, the master has entrusted each servant with a lot, and God has entrusted each of us with a lot. Are we using the gifts God has given us to bring about an increase in care and compassion, in health and understanding, in peace and justice? Are we using what we've received to bring a return?

When the master comes back to town, he finds that the first two servants used what they were given, and he rewards them equally. The dollar amount that the second servant has earned is less than half what the first servant has, but again that's not the point. The Master sees that both have used what they had, he gives identical praise to each, promises to trust each of them more and more, and invites them both to 'enter into the joy of your master.' This phrase is an allusion to something that the Gospel of Matthew talks about all the time – a heavenly banquet that is coming when God fulfills human history – there are several other parables that make reference to this, the gathering with God for a limitless feast when death and brutality are no more.

The way that Master treats the faithful servants, placing greater trust in them, and inviting them to sit at his table, these are symbolic ways that the gap between the exalted and the lowly gets narrowed. In this parable, the rewards the servants enjoy are not gained through deception, or through cheating. Each person gets to a seat of privilege through an investment in fidelity and trust in a relationship. I think we would benefit from having more of that in our contemporary financial system, and in all of our dealings as people in community.

Sadly, when he approaches the third servant, the Master is horribly disappointed. This servant, to whom he has also entrusted a great deal, has not done anything with what he was given; he actually buried it in the ground while the master was away. We don't know exactly why he did this – He gives a reason, but it sounds disingenuous, like an excuse – "Master," he says, "I knew that you were a harsh man – reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not plant, so I was afraid." Really? Nothing the master has done or said thus far has made him seem harsh or abusive – far from it, his generosity has been kind of amazing.

When he hears these words from his servant, the Master becomes furious. I don't know this for sure, but I suspect that he's angry about being described in way that wasn't true. Have you ever had somebody tell you how you are – and you know that person doesn't really get you at all? "Mary, I know you're a very impatient person, but hear me out." "Steve, I know you're a total control-freak" "Gene, I know you're no good at math, so let me help you out here." The blanket statements another person says about you usually say more about them than you, but pettiness aside, mischaracterizations can really make you angry.

So the Master is angry as he refutes the servants' reasoning – if you really believed I was harsh and vicious and unfair, if you really believed I reap where I do not sow, you would have put the money in the bank and earned a little bit of interest – but you didn't do that. So don't blame me for what you didn't do. It's at that point that he takes the talent he'd entrusted to that servant, and gave it to one of the others.

God is always against injustice, abuse, and the manipulative use of money and power. God doesn't want to see anyone going without the basic needs for food, shelter, healthcare, least of all when there are people just around the corner with more wealth than anyone could ever need. At the same time, God is ready to be extravagantly generous to all God's people, bestowing blessings far beyond what we might expect or earn. Everyone in this sanctuary has experienced hard times, and some of us are passing through the most difficult season of our lives, right now. And still in the midst of it we know that the gifts we've been given in our lives have been extraordinary.

We have the freedom to do with these gifts what we will, but God wants to know that we are using them for good.

Have you made a financial commitment to ministries that are changing lives for the better, in this church or elsewhere, ministries that you know are increasing and expanding compassion in the world? Are you writing your letters to your legislators to insist that our government prioritize empowerment of the poor, and equalized opportunity and accountability for all people? Are you seeking after healing and forgiveness in your relationships, and modeling reconciliation and understanding for your children and your neighbors? Are you directing your time, your energy and your skills so that there will be more peace and provision for God's people, because of how you used what is yours to deploy?

Everything that we have has been entrusted to us to us by God. And these gifts are only the beginning of the good news we know in Jesus Christ. Because as we use them for good, and we watching the way and will of God increase, we'll receive even more opportunities to participate in God's transformation of the world, we'll grow closer to God in relationships of trust, and join with God in feast of joy.