"Well Done"
Matthew 25:14-30
A Sermon preached by The Rev. Douglas M. Donley
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University Baptist Church
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As I think about our beloved sister Tai Shigaki and her near century on this earth, I can't help but think of the words to the old spiritual.

If when you give the best of your service,
Telling the world that the Savior is come;
Be not dismayed when folk don't believe you;
God understands and says "Well done."

Oh, when I come to the end of my journey,
Weary of life and the battle is won;
Carrying the staff and cross of redemption,
God understands and says "Well done."

But if you try and fail in your trying,
Hands sore and scarred from the work you've begun;
Take up your cross, run quickly to meet thee;
God understands; and says, 'Well done'.

If when this life of labor is ended,
And the reward of the race you have run;
Oh! the sweet rest prepared for the faithful
Will be thy blest and final "Well done."

Well done, good and faithful servant. It's the refrain not only of today's scripture, but also of Tai's life. Most of us have read the newsletter articles about her remarkable life. If I was to recount it all, we would be here long past our appointed hour.

I met Tai Shigaki way back in 1984. I had just graduated from Denison University, Tai's alma mater. I had become a part of a renegade Baptist church in Granville, Ohio—interested in peacemaking and justice seeking in the midst of a religious world dominated by the Moral Majority which brought with it a kind of politics that co-opted too many believers. Tai was newly retired from her work as a YWCA Executive Director, and Women's prison trainer and social worker, breaking new ground in both fields. She was tapped to be on the founding board of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. So, in that old church building in Granville, I got to know this diminutive woman with an oversized story and passion for peacemaking. It went far beyond having been interred in World War II, a suspect by her Japanese lineage. It was who

she was. A quiet trailblazer for peace, justice, mercy and compassion when the world told people that such notions were not only foolish but downright un-American. Nothing deterred her.

A few years later, when I was denied ordination twice for having views deemed too inclusive about our LGBTQ kinfolk, Tai was among the people at a Baptist Peace Conference in Keuka, NY who laid hands on my, commissioning me to a ministry of peace and justice. I have always felt that that ritual of laying on of hands is not just about the one who is being commissioned. But it's about the way we take those whose hands touch ours with us to do the foolish, challenging and often forsaken work of the Gospel. All of a sudden it doesn't seem so hard.

And for the last 20 years, I've had the honor of being in her presence as part of the UBC community. And she was part of us, even when she was living in Massachusetts. When she left us for her marriage adventure back when she was only 86, we created a Tai Shigaki Mission Travel Fund to carry on her work of sponsoring people to go on mission trips when she could no longer do it. That fund has helped dozens of people travel to enlarge the mission and open the eyes of our community. Most recently, it has been the main way we have funded visits from our sister church in Leon, Nicaragua.

And here we are at her centennial and we say well done, good and faithful servant.

I have to admit that the title for this sermon came before really looking in to the origins of the phrase, "well done, good and faithful servant." But I know Tai would not be content if I didn't look at the scripture with a critical eye. So here we go.

This is the penultimate parable of Matthew's Gospel. Parables are more than morality tales about personal sinfulness. They are a teaching device used to expose a corrupt system and our complicity in it. American Baptist Theologian Bill Herzog wondered, "What if the concern of the parables was not the reign of God but the reigning systems of oppression that dominated Palestine in the time of Jesus? What if the scenes they presented were not stories about how God works in the world, but…about how exploitation worked in Palestine?" (Herzog, 1994:7)

It's Herzog's thesis that in order to explain Jesus' execution by Rome as an insurrectionist (that's what crucifixion was reserved for), then he must have done something a whole lot more threatening than tell a few allegorical tales about getting along with one another. As Herzog puts it, "If he had been the kind of teacher popularly portrayed in the North American church, a master of the inner life, teaching the importance of spirituality and a private relationship with God, he would have been supported by the Romans a part of their rural pacification program"(Herzog, 1994:27).

So let's examine this so-called parable of the talents and see what it reveals about our world.

We often hear sermons on this parable during stewardship campaigns. Blessed are the investors for they will gain greatly, but woe to you who shun banks, stuff a mattress with your money and don't invest—for you will lose out in the long run. It's the perfect capitalist parable.

The fact that the scripture uses the word talents, is also fodder for many a sermon on the use of spiritual gifts. If you don't use your talents for God's work, then you are really missing out. It makes for good sermons that have the right balance of hyperbole, supposed laziness and utter familiarity to get the masses involved, invested or at least guilt-tripped.

But does this sound like the Jesus we know from Scripture? Let's look at it a bit closer.

A man going on a journey entrusts his property to certain servants. The property is in the form of talents. Now, a talent was up to 15 year's wages for a peasant. In Luke's version of the parable, he uses pounds instead of talents. A pound is one 60th of a talent or about 3 months wages for a peasant. The man going on a journey is part of the elite who owns a lot of property—capital in form of pounds, talents. He entrusts the property, the wealth, in the care of three people. One he gave 5 talents, or 75 years wages of a peasant. Another he gave 2 talents, or 30 years of wages. The third he gave only one talent, 15 years of wages. The owner didn't tell the people what to do with the talents. He just "entrusted" them with the talents.

Maybe he was being indicted and needed to launder his money.

Maybe he was trying to hide his assets.

Maybe he was trying to see who would make the greatest return on the investment.

We don't know.

We do know that the first two did the predictable thing.

They "traded" and got more talents. Now, trading talents was not something that happened the way we trade stocks these days. No, trading talents meant acquiring land from people. It meant calling in people's debts. It meant foreclosing on land. It meant transferring farmland from peasants to a rich landowner. The first two make money by whatever means necessary. No one ever questions this practice in stewardship sermons on the parable of the talents, but there it is. It's like how we got the land on which this church stands. It was originally owned or at least stewarded by the Dakota people. But through treaties, nefarious dealings, and squandered deals, it no longer became Dakota land but white land. I think of the property owned by Japanese in the 1940's. Once they were forcibly removed, who owned their property? Were they ever fairly compensated? Or were their lives statistics hidden under the talent expansion practices of the "good servants" to whom the landowner says 'well done?'

After the master comes back from his "journey", he sees how his investments have been doing. The first two say that they have doubled their talents. They may well have done a lot more than that, but "double" is what they reported to the man. The master rewarded them by putting them in charge of divisions within his empire, saying, "well done, good and faithful servant."

It's the third person that messes everything up. The third person buries his one talent in the ground. The master derides him for his laziness and his lack of ingenuity. The master tells him that he should have invested the money in the bank and earned some interest for the man. Because of his laziness, his talent is given to the richest of the servants and he is sent out into the utter darkness where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. The stewardship sermon says, don't squander your gifts, but use them to God's glory, otherwise, you'll burn in hell. Pass the offering plate and the peace of the Lord be with you.

But I have always gotten hung up on this conclusion. And it is because the third person seems to me to be the most noble of them all. He obediently protects the talent entrusted to him. He could have spent it on himself, fed his family, heck an entire village. He could have fled. But he buried the talent in the ground. According to rabbinic law, he was being obedient to the Jewish dictum that burying money is the most responsible way to protect it, especially in a desert environment. I'm sure he protected it from thieves and covetous ones. He does not abuse the money entrusted to him. He engages in no risky or corrupt behavior, and yet he is punished by the master.

Now, where people get hung up in this scripture is that they think the rich man is God. But does the rich man sound like God to you? Does God send you to hell for not using a bank?

Listen to how the servant describes the rich man. The third servant says, "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed. I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, have what is yours." The third servant had a lot of guts and like the child who said "the emperor has no clothes on", he told the truth about the master. He said, "you are a harsh man," meaning you are mean and nasty and that people are afraid of you, so no one wants to tell you the truth.

He then says, "you reap where you do not sow and gather where you do not plant," meaning "you are a thief. You are harvesting someone else's crop. You let them pay the money for the seed and tend the crops and then you come in, and take the fruit of their labors." That's what happens when the others trade their talents. They take land and crops from the farmers—crops they didn't plant. It's like exercising imminent domain and saying that my needs are more important than your needs. It's like taking land and putting your family in a concentration or relocation camp. It's like burning down successful black-owned businesses in Tulsa or plowing over the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul to make way for a freeway.

"I was afraid", says the man. But he doesn't say that he was afraid of the master. He was afraid of what? Of the others who might trump up charges against him? Of the secret police who like their system the way it is thank you very much and do not like it one bit when someone points it out? Or maybe he was afraid of God.

The end of the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, is the therefore of this parable. In that story, God is always on the side of the poor, the outcast, the hungry, the imprisoned and the naked. When did we see you hungry or thirsty or naked or imprisoned? Christ says, 'whenever you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.' We ought to be afraid of God if we do not care for the poor, says then end of Matthew 25.

The third slave is the hero of the story. He tells the truth about the master. He says, in effect, even if you are part of the elite who own and control most of the world, you don't control my soul.

You don't control my action.

You don't control my people's faithful response. My people are the righteous remnant and we will make our case known in creative ways until such a time when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the fatling with the calf together. Nation shall not rise up sword against another and neither shall they study war anymore.

The third servant, was a conscientious objector to the system that always benefits the rich at the expense of the poor. He tells the truth, takes the consequences and exposes the brokenness of the system.

The master in this parable says to the first two servants, "Well done, good and faithful servants." But the third servant is thrown into utter darkness where there is weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.

That's the way of the world. But it's not the way to which the Gospel points.

If the master is a thief who reaps where he doesn't sow. If he's harsh and can't be trusted, then ought we be looking for praise from him or should we be looking for praise from someone else?

Is God interested in us getting money by any means necessary? Or is God interested in us being loyal and responsible? Is God interested in us ripping other people off, or is God interested in us caring for all people—welcoming the poor and the outcasts to the table, feeding 5000 with a couple of loaves and fishes, risking uncleanliness by hanging out with lepers and demoniacs or even prisoners? Of course, God is looking for us to *not* do like they do in the world, but to rise above it. Like the third servant, tell the inconvenient truth even when a simple lie would be easier. Be a voice for truth, a witness for peace. Be a peacemaker, a justice-seeker, an advocate of prisoners. Don't confuse wealth with holiness or race with blessing. Then ***God*** will say, "well done." And that's what we want.

My friends, there is another narrative that pervades scripture. It's a subversive narrative and it's very good news. It's a narrative of equality, of care, compassion, mercy and love. That's the narrative of God that the parable hyperbolically advocates. It's a narrative that the talented Tai Shigaki has emulated for the better part of the last century. And we are better for it because we have walked alongside her and have been the recipients of her gentle and fierce wisdom. Look to a heart like that, implies Jesus, and God will say, 'Well done'.

Amen

Citations: *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, by William R. Herzog II. Westminster/John Knox Press 1994