

“Wholehearted, Hopeful Giving”

Matthew 25:14-30 & 1 John 4:19

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Prayer for Understanding May the words of our mouth and meditations of our heart be pleasing to you gracious God our rock and redeemer. Amen

Theodore Roosevelt said: “It is not the critic who counts; not the person who points out how the strong person stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if they fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that their place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

Listen for similarities in Jesus’ parable about stewardship in Matthew: **Matthew 25:14-30 NLT** “**Again, the Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a person going on a long trip. They called together their servants and entrusted their money to them while they were gone. They gave five bags of silver to one, two bags of silver to another, and one bag of silver to the last dividing it in proportion to their abilities. They then left on their trip. “The servant who received the five bags of silver began to invest the money and earned five more. The servant with two bags of silver also went to work and earned two more. But the servant who received one bag of silver dug a hole in the ground and hid the master’s money. “After a long time, their master returned from their trip and called them to give an account of how they had used their money. The servant to whom they had entrusted the five bags of silver came forward with five more and said, ‘Master, you gave me five bags of silver to invest, and I have earned five more.’ “The master was full of praise. ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let us celebrate together!’ “The servant who had received the two bags of silver came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two bags of silver to invest, and I have earned two more.’ “The master said, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let us celebrate together!’ “Then the servant with the one bag of silver came and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a harsh person, harvesting crops you did not plant and gathering crops you did not cultivate. I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth. Look, here is your money back.’ “But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy servant! If you knew I harvested crops I did not plant and gathered crops I did not cultivate, why didn’t you deposit my money in the bank? At least I could have gotten some interest on it.’ “Then the master ordered, ‘Take the money from this servant, and give it to the one with the ten bags of silver. To those who use well what they are given, even more will be given, and they will have an abundance. But from those who do nothing, even what little they have will be taken away. Now throw this useless servant into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”**

Why did the third person avoid investing, sharing their time and talents, giving of their money to expand love, joy and justice? They were more influenced by fear rather than hope. The deeper still answer involves, worthiness, belonging, cynicism and criticism. This deeper answer is what Roosevelt was contrasting. The critic does not count. The critic is a cold and timid soul who neither knows victory nor defeat. The credit belongs to the person who is actually in the arena, striving, trying hard, and they make mistakes, and they fail often, and they may succeed, and they spend themselves for a worthy cause, and in their daring greatly there is transformation and love is expanded.

I have seen the wickedness of the critic. They stand on the sideline, pointing out every mistake and tell others to do things their way. Too often volunteers quit because of criticism. Sometimes the critic is

transitioning a task to another person and instead of giving them freedom to do the task in a way that utilizes their gifts they scold them for not doing it the way they did it in the past.

Typically, workcamp sends out crews of six to do home repairs. One year, I was placed on a great crew. We helped and encouraged each other. We gave freedom for each person to do the task their own way unless that way was unsafe or wasteful, then we explained why in a compassionate loving way. When challenging roadblocks emerged, instead of shaming, blaming, and arguing we shared ideas and formulated a plan which a few times worked the first try and a few times we had to go to plan b and once to plan d. The crew had fun, was productive, and finished our home repair early. We were assigned to help another crew that was struggling. When we arrived, everything was a mess. Little work was done. One person was critical of everyone, so a couple of people were working out of eyesight and three people were avoiding the criticism in the house talking to the residents. Soon, the crew I was on was being criticized. So, we formed a circle to talk. I told the critic to listen and invited others to share why the work was difficult. The critic would interrupt with defensive justifications. Several times, I had to tell the critic to listen, that they would have time to talk after everyone explained their perspective. It was a turbulent conversation. Eventually, we got to a place where we were able to create a work plan together. Slowly, encouragement and joy grew. The critic was angry, gnashing their teeth. On the last day when the work was done, the critic finally showed some joy and was willing to connect with people on their crew. I was sad for the critic. It seemed to me they desperately wanted to form friendships. Unfortunately, their need to be in control, to be right, fed their abrasive criticism which was not overcome by their more friendly demeanor on the last day, so they never formed new friendships.

In Jesus' parable, the wicked servant is a critic who spoke with overstatements, exaggerations, and absolutes. The wicked servant said: "I knew you were a harsh person, harvesting crops you did not plant and gathering crops you did not cultivate."

The wicked servant was fearful instead of hopeful. The world is a messy place and every act of love and goodness endures forever. The world is full of great need, violence, and inequality and every act of compassionate sharing brings more heaven to earth. Everyone makes mistakes and by God's grace we all are given infinite opportunities to live abundantly. The wicked servant said: "I was afraid I would lose your money, so I hid it in the earth." One misses 100 percent of the opportunities one does not take. Instead of fearing failure, we are encouraged to hope for success and when failure happens to learn and try another way.

Notice the criticism and fear of the wicked servant this time from The Message paraphrase. **Matthew 25:24-30 MSG "The servant given one thousand said, 'Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.' "The master was furious. 'That is a terrible way to live! It is criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. "Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this "play-it-safe" who will not go out on a limb. Throw them out into utter darkness.'"**

The parable begins with a person generously entrusting large sums of money to people based on their abilities. We can infer that the generous giver knows each person well, loves them, sees them and has facilitated a community of belonging. Two of the servants respond to the love, belonging, and generous gift by going all in on expanding money, goodness, and love. Two of the servants are grateful for their blessings and strive to bless others. Two servants have connection and courage to share, invest, and give to create a more loving world. One servant is disconnected and clings to what they have in fear. It is the responsibility of everyone in this parable to create an environment where everyone is connected, belongs, is loved and has the courage to share. Therefore, the struggle of the third servant indicates that everyone in this parable has opportunities to expand their stewardship. Corporate sin explains that if one person is hungry, everyone is sinning. If one person is excluded, everyone is sinning. If one person feels disconnected, unloved, that they are not enough, then everyone is sinning. If one person is afraid to invest their time, talent, and treasure, then everyone is sinning. This parable urges us to create a worldwide community where all are connected, belong, and are loved, to create a culture without fear, abounding with hope, to create a world where all are affirmed, encouraged, and empowered to love, live, and share exponentially growing goodness. The fear, criticism, and failure to share, invest, and develop talents of the third servant is both their responsibility and the responsibility of the other servants to

create a community where they all flourish. The parable invites us to go beyond the surface that labels two servants' actions good and faithful and a third servant's actions wicked and lazy to love into existence a world where no one is cast out into darkness.

Brene Brown is an academic researcher. What follows is my attempt to summarize some of her findings. Connection gives purpose and meaning to life. Until a person feels loved, that they belong, that they are worthy, they will struggle to live. Scripture puts it bluntly. **1 John 4:19 "We love because God first loved us."** Shame is the fear of disconnection. Shame gives rise to thinking, I am not enough which yields fear and withdrawal. God proclaims you are enough. Everyone belongs to God's family. God loves everyone. Each person is created in God's image. Deep connection takes vulnerability and being seen. We are to see the image of God in each person, see the image of God in everyone. Brene found that there are clearly two groups of people. One group was generous, courageous, compassionate, flowing from their wholeheartedness. They were authentic, vulnerable, and willing to take risks which grew their joy, creativity, belonging, gratitude, and love. As one's sense of worthiness expands, so does their sense that they are loved and belong. As a person receives more and more love, they become more wholehearted, enabling them to be more generous and loving creating belonging for more people which makes them even more wholehearted. Biblical this is called shalom. The more wholehearted, the more compassionate and courageous. Courage is the ability to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart. The courageous are not afraid to tell who they are, to share their vulnerabilities and shame, because they have hope that they are transforming into a more loving person which feeds an upward goodness spiral. God is gracious. Each of us is imperfect and we are designed for transformation, for resurrection to be connected with God, everyone and the cosmos, to belong and share love. Each of us is enough because we are God's beloved child. Each of us is created in God's image to create, resurrect and expand the love of the cosmos.

When one is not wholehearted, not connected, not sensing they are worthy of love and belonging, they numb with spending, food, binging, addictions etc. They make the uncertain--certain, black and white, I am right, you are wrong and criticize which fuels fear. A fearful person feels disconnected, unloved, that they do not belong, the more they numb their vulnerability, the less compassion and less courage to share, invest and give and the more critical, judgmental, and blaming which feeds a downward destructive spiral.

Brene Brown concluded TedTalk with this: "To let ourselves be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen, to love with our whole heart even though there is no guarantee. To practice gratitude and joy in those moments of terror, when we are wondering; Can I love this much? Can I believe this passionately? To stop and instead of catastrophizing what might happen to say I am so grateful because to feel vulnerable means I am alive. And most important to believe, I am enough. Because when we believe we are enough then we stop screaming and start listening we are kinder and gentler to others and ourselves."

Kayla Craig wrote a blessing for us today. "In a world often drenched in pain, suffering, and injustice, it is a gift to remember that we are formed and made by a God who loves us and does not leave us. We often feel compelled to earn our worth and belovedness, but the One who grants each breath affirms our inherent worth. In light of God's infinite love, we are beloved, the very fibers of our being woven with care. We cannot work our way to receiving God's compassion. It is already there—as present as the twinkling stars in the sky, as near as the clouds of breath on a cold night. You are a blessing because the One from whom all blessings flow sees you, knows you, and calls you by name. When you are facing impossibilities, it is not your productivity or power that will push you through, rather the grace of God. This divine assurance does not clarify every outcome or guarantee a life of ease. Yet this promise of Love that makes a way when there is no way offers us hope that we do not face our challenges alone. As we journey may you rest under the warmth of these truths."

I hear all of this in Jesus' parable. Two servants experienced love and belonging which expanded their compassion, love and desire to create connections, so they took the money, their talents, their time, and took risks, they shared all and goodness was multiplied. Jesus' parable urges us to give generously of our time, talents and treasures, to overcome fear and live in hope and give, invest and love with hope, to create a worldwide community where everyone is connected, everyone loved, everyone belonging which will exponentially expand peace, compassion, sharing and generosity which will bring heaven to earth. Let us strive to be wholehearted, hopeful, givers. Amen