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## *The Way We Believe is the Way We Act*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**

**Proper 28 – Year A**

*He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." ... And the master said, "As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Matthew 25:14-30*

There's an old story about a wise priest listening to the rants of a young atheist. The young atheist claims that he just doesn't believe in a god with a white beard sitting on a high throne judging everybody, and deciding who gets a reward and who doesn't. He just doesn't believe in a god who is severe and mean and casting people into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The wise priest gazes back at the young atheist, and the priest says, simply, "I don't believe in that kind of god either." And so the old priest begins to explain the kind of God he does believe in, one who is life-giving and grace-giving and encouraging.

That old story represents a critical principle, for me, of the spiritual life. The kind of god we believe in will determine, very much, the way we behave in the world. People who believe in a loving god generally try to be loving. People who believe in a forgiving god are generally forgiving. But people who believe in an angry god are generally angry themselves. People who believe in a punitive god are generally punitive themselves. People who believe in a discouraging god are discouraging. People who believe in an encouraging god are encouraging.

Which kind of God do you believe in this morning?

My first impression of the gospel parable from Matthew this morning always shocks me. I am accustomed to think that the "Master" in this parable represents "God." Maybe we all make that assumption. And so I am shocked that the God I believe in would call a servant "worthless" and throw him into outer darkness. But I want to interpret this parable differently this morning; I want to claim something else about this parable. This parable is not about the Master! Instead, this parable is about types of belief, types of faith. One type of faith is encouraging and leads to fruitfulness. The other type of faith is discouraging.

Let me talk about this discouraging faith, as represented by the miserable servant. I am saddened by this guy. For I know this poor fellow who received the one talent, and who was so afraid, and who hid the talent in the ground. This poor fellow who received the one talent is the person who believes in a fear-provoking god, a stern and rigid god, a god who makes people afraid, a god whose grasp is so tight that one is afraid to take risks in life.

While the first two servants, who had received the stewardship of five and two talents, are out trading and investing and making their talents profitable, this third servant is absolutely miserable. He cannot risk this small talent, this tiny resource which has been entrusted to him.

He is afraid that he will fail. He is afraid that he will be exposed to the world as an inept, inefficient, and generally useless

fellow. Deep down, he feels worthless. Thus, when others say harsh things about him, those words agree with his innermost feelings: "You are lazy. You are not conscientious. You cannot think. You are a disgrace."

He believes those words. And the more he believes those words, the more they come true. For, again, the way we believe about ourselves is the way we act in the world.

What a tragic parable this is! When this poor and bedraggled servant arrives with the one hidden talent, he actually declares his creed, his statement of belief: "Master, I knew you to be a hard man," he says. That's what he believes! And, thus, the master he believes in has no mercy. His kind of master tears into the servant and fulfills exactly what the servant feared. Yes, the master is a harsh man, reaping where he does not sow. Yes, the master takes even this one talent from the poor servant and orders the servant to be cast into the outer darkness. The master behaves in exactly the way the miserable servant expects the master to act. The servant, in his mind, expected the master to be harsh and mean-spirited, and so the master was.

The way we believe about God will be the way we experience God. If we believe God to be harsh and mean-spirited, God will be.

I daresay there is not one person in this room, including myself, who has not felt afraid, like this third servant. Given what we feel is a small talent anyway (what's one talent compared to our neighbor's five?), every one of us has had occasion to just give up. "Why don't I just take this talent and go hide? I'll bury the talent in the ground so it will be safe, and I won't have to risk anything." We've been afraid before.

I believe that our fear is directly related to our sense of community. Those who do not belong, somehow, to a caring and trusting community, are usually those who are afraid. On the other hand, those who accept community, and who are willing to be vulnerable to that community – because they trust it – are usually able to gain courage over fear.

We learn, most of us, the value of a trusting and caring community very early in life. When we began to walk on two legs, we trusted those hands which held us up. And when those hands let go, urging us to go on, we still trusted that voice. We fell, but we knew we could also continue unashamed. We were vulnerable, but we were loved and cared for. We were thereby given courage to take risks.

But we have grown up hearing a myriad of other voices. Somewhere along the line, maybe the voices we gather around us grew harsher and more uncaring. Maybe folks around us lost confidence in us; then we lost confidence in ourselves.

When we act out of our fear and anger, then what we say usually becomes true. Our resources look very meager indeed. Others do strike us as mean-spirited. The master does act harshly and impersonally.

Today, friends, we are called to be part of a community which overcomes fear. We are called to be part of a community which trusts, and loves, and blesses each other.

Yes, we are called to be a blessing community, blessing one another with words of courage and care. It does take courage to live in this world; it does take courage to risk our resources and talents. It takes courage to be vulnerable and trust others with our weakness. That courage can come only from the deep inner belief that someone loves us. God loves us.

Ultimately, the third servant is wrong. His talent is not meager and unsubstantial. The master is not hard and mean-spirited. They both turned out that way only because that is what the servant deeply believed. The way we believe affects the way we act! What we believe affects our talents! What we believe affects our experience of others!

But he is wrong, that third servant. Someone does love him. And it is up to us, the community of faith to prove it. Will we bless and encourage the servants around us? Are we a blessing to those people we say we love? Will we take our place in this blessing community, the Church?

This Church exists to tell the world that the Master is not harsh, that our gifts are not meager. Our God is not harsh, and our gifts are not meager. The Church exists for blessing and encouragement.

This is why so often St. Paul exhorts his churches to encourage one another. He urges encouragement to the Thessalonians in today's epistle reading. The Church exists for encouragement. "En-courage" said St. Paul. Put people "in courage"; don't

put them in fear. "Encourage one another," he said, "and build one another up."

Encourage, and every one of our talents will multiply in joy. In courage, every one of our talents will multiply in joy!

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