

“Pain is what it’s all about”

Matthew 25:14-30

Simply put, suffering is universal. Pain is what it’s all about. Life is terminal.

I think when Jesus looked out at the world of young people and old people, lucky people, unlucky people, black people, white people, poor people, rich people, and said, “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest,” he was saying that part of what it means to be a human being in this world is to labor and be heavy laden, to be in need of whatever he means by rest.

The universality of pain. We all know what it’s about. We’re all in it. And there are all sorts of different ways of dealing with it.

We all have different ways of dealing with our pain, depending on what day it happens to be and how we happen to be feeling.

One of them, the one that was certainly the one that my parents tended to choose while I was growing up, and that I think most dysfunctional families tend to choose, is to deal with your pain by simply forgetting it. Shutting it away.

But I think the price one pays by dealing with your pain by forgetting it, by stuffing it inside, by not looking at it, is that some part of you doesn’t grow. When we don’t look at our own pain, we have a harder time sensing other people’s pain and that part of us that wants to reach out to others in pain – doesn’t grow.

So that’s one way. Bad things happen. Painful things happen and we survive them by simply moving on as if they hadn’t happened at all.

Another way, I think, is to be somehow trapped by your pain. Being stopped in your tracks. Never, in a sense being able to escape your pain. Never being able to move on out of it into whatever lies beyond.

You keep living it over and over and over again, almost relishing the bitterness of it. So you deal with your pain by allowing it to overwhelm you, by allowing it to stop you in your tracks.

So we deal with our pain by forgetting it or by being trapped by it or by making it into what we might call “competitive pain”. “You think you’ve had it bad? Let me tell you what’s happened to me!”

Pain becomes a kind of accomplishment. What have I done with my life? I’ve suffered like hell, and if you think you’ve suffered, let me tell you how I’ve suffered.

In recent months, I’ve been thinking about how I (we) deal with pain. I was taught to forget it and stuff it. Sometimes I’m trapped by it and sometimes I compare my pain to other people’s pain. I’m sure there are a hundred other ways we have of coping with pain.

I think at one time or another each one of us has probably coped with it in all those ways. One day, one way. Another day, another way.

Certainly years ago, and to some degree still, I dealt with the sad parts of my life by forgetting them. I didn’t know I was forgetting them. I didn’t say to myself, “I’m going to forget them”, but the coping mechanism of forgetting had been so strongly switched on in my childhood that it became a sort of automatic response.

When I read this parable from Jesus, I realized there is another way of dealing with our pain. The parable of the talents teaches us to be a good steward of our pain.

I don't know how you read it, but I take the talents—one gets five, one gets two, one gets one—as whatever it is that life deals us. It's the hand we're dealt at birth. Some are born white, some are born black. Some are born in one country, some in another country. Some are born into families that don't know what's going on and are dysfunctional and do terrible things; some are born into families where there seems to be a kind of peace. So the world gives us a little hand of cards, and then we're left to play with them. I think that's what the parable is about.

The way in which these three people handle what they've been given is important. The one to start with, I think, because it's the most striking part of the parable, the most frightening part, is the poor soul who took his one talent and buried it in the ground and met such a terrible fate. He explains why he buried it, saying to the master, "I was afraid." *I was afraid.* And I think of the master as God, or you could think about the master as life itself who dealt the hand. "I knew you to be a hard man, and I was afraid: What if I lost the talent?"

And, of course, he was right. God is a hard God in many ways, who says, "Be perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect." That's a hard rule: to be perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect. I think of the first epistle of John, that devastating law that is set down, "He who does not love, remains in death." That's a hard saying. In other words, not to love is in a sense to die. He was right, the man with the one talent, to be afraid. There is much in life—there is much in the nature of God as we understand him—of which to be afraid. He asks a great deal of us.

So in fear, being afraid—afraid of his life, afraid of living, afraid of making use of his talents, afraid to do the wrong thing, afraid of whatever he's afraid of—he takes it and he buries it. He buries what he'd been given. He buries his experience. And the master is angry.

The one-talent man says another thing that seems to be so revealing: "You're a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow." As I understand that, God does not sow the field of our life. He does not make these things happen. He did not cause Chester's car to smash into Paula's car, killing her young husband and her daughter. God doesn't deal with the world that way; he doesn't move us around like chess pieces. He does not sow, but he expects that out of whatever the world in its madness does to us, we will somehow reap a harvest. He does not sow these things that happen, but he expects us to deal with these things in creative and redemptive and life-opening sorts of ways. But again, the one-talent man was right; God does reap where he did not sow. He gathers where he did not winnow. He does not sow the pain, he does not make the pain happen, but he looks to us to harvest treasure from the pain. Like the girl in the fairytale, he looks for us to spin gold out of the straw of what happens to us.

Then the master speaks his word of darkness. He looks at the one-talent man and calls him a wicked and slothful servant. Because, of all the seven deadly sins, sloth is not only the one that this one-talent man is guilty of, but it may be the worst of the sins. Sloth. You think of all the others as much worse than that—lust, anger, and pride, and so on—but sloth is what this man is condemned for. Sloth is getting through life on automatic pilot. Not really being alive. Not really making use of what happens to you. Burying what you might have made something out of. Playing it safe with your life. To bury your life, to bury your pain, to bury your joy. To bury whatever it is that the world gives you, and then live as carefully as you can without really living at all. And I think that when the master speaks of being cast into darkness, whether it was wailing and gnashing of teeth, it's not so much that he's saying, "I'm going to punish you by casting you into the darkness where you will wail and gnash your teeth," but, "To live a buried life is to say

you have not really lived your life at all". To live closed up in yourself, is itself wailing and gnashing of teeth. The buried life is a lonely life, a dark life.

And then the ultimate word of judgment that the master speaks is, "From him who has not, even what he has will be taken away". This from, you must remember, the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd. From him who has not, even what he has will be taken. That seems the ultimate injustice, to take away the one talent from a man who has only one talent and give it to the other ones. I take that to mean, again not a punishment so much as the inevitable consequence of burying your life. If you bury your life – it you don't face, among other things, your pain – your life shrinks. It is in a way diminished. It is in a way taken away.

From him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. That's not punishing the one-talent man so much as to say to him, "That's what happens when you do not live your life, when you do not harvest your pain. You have less life every day."

And then, of course, there are the other servants who put their money out to earn interest, whom the master calls good and faithful servants. Faithful, as if their goodness is their faithfulness. They somehow—despite the fact that the master was a hard master, despite the fact that God makes impossible demands of us or terrible demands of us: to be perfect, to be loving, to be open and have faith in him that somehow all will be well; that it's worth taking the risk, even if you live your life and it doesn't turn out the way you want. There is forgiveness. There is compassion. There is mercy in God. And therefore, you dare take your chances and do what you can do with the hand that life, or God, has dealt you.

May the peace of God . . .

#704 – When Pain of the World Surrounds Us