

That's Not God in the Picture

Matthew 25:14-30

A teacher in a second-grade Sunday School class noticed that one little boy was feverishly working on a drawing long after the other children had put their crayons and paper away. She asked what he was doing. "I'm drawing a picture of god," he responded. The teacher smiled gently and said to him, "Johnny, no one knows what God looks like." Still without looking up Johnny replied, "They will now!"

We keep trying, don't we? How much we want to know perhaps not so much what God looks like as what God *is* like! We desire every possible insight into the nature of God. We Christians say that our understanding of God comes through God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. Of course, we learn about the nature of God in many other ways, but I find that when I ask about the attitude and work of God, I inevitably go back to what I know about Jesus. What did Jesus do and what did Jesus say?

When I want assurance about what God is like, I turn to a story such as that of the prodigal son and I recognize God as loving, searching, accepting, and merciful Father. I study the beatitudes and see God as lifting up those poor in spirit and those who weep and fulfilling the hunger and thirst of those who seek to see righteousness and justice prevail. I see God in the work of Jesus as healer, comforter, and companion.

My view of God—my picture of God—is that God is creator and redeemer, a parent who loves each and every one of us unconditionally, a gracious and empowering Spirit who is leading all of us back to himself. Consequently, I have always had difficulty with our approach to the parable of the talents. We tend not to look carefully enough at the stories of Jesus. We assume that most of them are simple allegories and we sometimes get lessons from them that are more harmful than helpful.

This story seems straightforward. It appears that God is like a master who entrusts his wealth to his servants, leaves them alone for a time, then returns demanding a return on his investment. Those who succeed are blessed and those who fail are cursed. We leave the parable with the fear that we had better not fail to use, develop, and multiply our talents. If we fail, we go to hell. That's the way we have always interpreted it, isn't it? Every commentary on my shelf takes that approach. But something within me just cannot accept that. I want to protest that God is not like that. That is not God in this picture. At least, not the God I see in the life and teachings of Jesus! And yet, according to Matthew, Jesus told this story.

Let me list my problems with this concept of God. First, to say that this is God blessing the successful and cursing the unsuccessful and fearful seems to imply that what we do and what we accomplish make us right with God. This idea contradicts the notion that God accepts us through grace without merit or deserving on our part.

Second, this approach seems to bless success. It seems to say that the systems in place in the world are quite fine as they are. Obviously, many Americans like to think this. American religion is strongly influenced by prosperity theology. Prosperity theology is the teaching that authentic religious belief and proper religious behavior will result in material prosperity. If you want to hear a good example of this, watch Joel Osteen's television show for a few minutes. It makes all the sense in the world. God blesses the faithful. It makes sense if you are already successful or if making it in the world is your highest ambition!

Not many persons who take the parable to mean this stop to realize that what the two successful servants did was illegal. Jewish laws against usury were strict. Would god bless someone who got rich by breaking the law? Is the CEO of a large financial firm who gets his obscene bonus while his company is being bailed out by taxpayer money more righteous than those who suffer during the current financial crisis? Didn't Jesus seek the overthrow of this kind of injustice?

Third, this approach to the parable seems to condemn persons who are fearful and who see themselves as failures in the world. The servant with the single bag of gold admitted his fear of his master and confessed to hiding the money to avoid any responsibility for it. Ordinarily Jesus reached out to such persons with forgiveness and encouragement. He ate with tax-collectors and befriended prostitutes. He told the woman taken in adultery that he did not condemn her. Why would he picture God in such a way?

Finally, there is the horrible sentence handed down by the master: “As for the useless servant, throw him out into the dark, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth!” You cringe every time you hear this. Did Jesus really say it? Is God like that?

Well, those are my problems with this parable and with the usual interpretation. When this text appeared in the lectionary, I started to skip it and maybe use the one from the epistles. Then I read a short piece by Marcus Borg that takes the position that perhaps the parable means the very opposite. (*Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, pp. 246-247.) That comment brought it all together for me. This is not a picture of what God is like; this is a picture of what God is not like!

In Jesus' day a harsh economic system was in place. It can be called a domination system. Rome ruled Palestine with an iron hand. The Romans allowed an upper class of leaders in Israel and a religious establishment so long as those in control maintained a peaceful order. The rich could get richer and the powerful more powerful just as long as there were no problems that Rome had to address. Religious and political leaders worked together. You can imagine what happened. The rich did get richer and the poor got poorer. Jesus appeared as a peasant revolutionary. His message, despite the way his followers have changed it to make it conform to our comfortable systems, was one of transformation. His teachings on the kingdom of God stood in stark contrast to accepted values.

To say that this parable teaches that God rewards the successful or even the faithful and curses the weak and unsuccessful is to use it to support a system that “keeps people in their place.” The kingdom of God is among us. That kingdom takes the other approach. It lifts up the fallen; it seeks out the lost; it accepts the unacceptable. The kingdom of God is a reversal of the way things are.

So, what does the parable say? What positive word does it convey? It is placed within a series of stories about change. Matthew says that the stories tell about the coming of the Son of Man. They could be stories about the coming of the kingdom. Whether this and the other parables around it refer to the transformation of the world as a result of the kingdom of God in our midst or a second coming of Jesus, the effect is the same. We are to be ready for God’s mighty action.

It is important to recognize the weaknesses in our world and the need for change. The very idea that prosperity theology proposes—that God would bless us if we do the right things and let the rest of the world die in poverty and pain—makes me think that American religion is completely bankrupt. Watching expectantly for God’s change leads us away from that.

One of the first proponents of that concept was Jim Bakker. No doubt you remember the television show (the PTL Club), Heritage, USA, the lavish lifestyle, and the huge following that Jim and Tammie Faye Bakker had. They and others were enjoying what they called the “blessings of God.” Everyone could enjoy those blessings if they did the right things. In 1989 Jim Bakker was convicted of fraud and sentenced to prison.

Seven years later Bakker wrote an autobiography entitled *I Was Wrong*. In that book he said, “God does not promise that we will all be rich and prosperous, as I once preached. When I finally studied the Bible in prison, it became clear to me that not one man or woman—not even the prophets of God—led a life without pain.” He also wrote, “To my surprise, after months of

studying Jesus, I concluded that He did not have one good thing to say about money.” (Quoted by James Mulholland, *Praying Like Jesus*, pp. 109-113.)

It is also important, this story seems to imply, that we remain faithful to our tasks not out of fear of God’s anger or out of hope of reward but out of love. I think we should serve in ministry because we want to do so. I think we should give because we want to give. I think we should study and pray and mediate because we desire a closer walk with God. I realize that at times the desire is not there and you do these things because of who you are, but over time, if we try to serve God out of any motive other than love, it will be fruitless.

So this story becomes a word of encouragement. Be ready. Transformation is coming. God’s coming into our lives is something to be anticipated, not dreaded. For God brings redemption. God makes things right.

J. William Harris

16 November 2008