

# Imagining Grace

*A sermon on Matthew 25:14-30 by Nathan Nettleton, 19 November 2017*

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## Message

The gospel gives us a vision of God that liberates us to live freely, expansively and joyously.

## Sermon

Perhaps the most important thing in determining the shape of our relationship with God is the image of God we hold in our minds. That's no surprise when you think about it, because the strongest determining factor in your relationship with anyone is the image you hold of them in your mind.

You will relate to someone who you think is a dangerous authoritarian differently to how you will relate to someone who you think is a gullible pushover. And until you discover the hard way, it doesn't matter whether those images are completely back to front, they will influence your feelings and behaviour towards those people more than the as yet unknown realities. It's the same with God. Your gut level belief about what God is like will determine how you feel about God and consequently how you will behave and how you will relate to God.

Richard Rohr, a teacher and writer on spirituality who is always worth reading, says that most people in our society, including most people in most churches, have a rather sullen, passive-aggressive relationship with God. Passive-aggressive behaviour is what we do when we see someone as disapproving and unreasonable but, because of their relationship to us or the position they occupy, we have to make out that we are happy with the relationship, either for appearances sake, or because we don't feel we can risk upsetting the other and sparking an open conflict.

There has been a dramatic illustration of this in some of the news recently about sexual harassment in the entertainment industry. The comedian, Louis CK, who is now admitting his guilt, said that at the time of his offences, he excused his behaviour to himself on the grounds that he asked consent before masturbating in front of young women, and that he never forced them to stay and so they were free to leave. So why didn't they leave?

Well, most women have learned from an early age to avoid antagonising or humiliating dangerous men so as to reduce the risks of their behaviour becoming even more dangerous. People will passively endure the most appalling behaviour if they are fearful that upsetting the perpetrator might provoke even worse behaviour.

Many couples fall into passive-aggressive ways of relating when they live with the resentment of believing that they can never please each other or make each other happy, but they can't be seen to be openly hostile to one another. We feel aggro, but we hide it under a cover of passivity. To express it or try to deal with it would take too much energy or involve too great a risk.

And if Richard Rohr is right, that's how most of us relate to God. We secretly, perhaps even unconsciously, think that God is harsh and unreasonable, that God sets impossible standards and withholds any real expression of love because we can't attain them, that God is unfairly keeping score with a scale we can barely even get onto. It paralyses us and fills us with

resentment, but since God is God, we have to pretend, perhaps even to ourselves, to think God is wonderful and go on saying nice things about how loving and generous God is.

The parable we heard from Jesus in the gospel reading tonight speaks of this kind of thing. I need to acknowledge that there are multiple ways of interpreting this parable and the scholars are divided on it. Some even believe that the bloke with the one talent who buries it and ends up tossed out is supposed to be the hero of the story who represents the culture of God. Others say that that's true of Luke's version, but not this one, Matthew's, and many aren't even on the same page.

Perhaps like all the best stories, it is open to various different readings, and the Holy Spirit will use it to speak truth to us regardless of which possibility grabs us at a particular time. I'm going to go with a fairly conventional reading of the story, but look at it from a bit of a different angle from what I've usually heard it taken.

You see, I think the bloke who hides the one talent (and a talent was just a large unit of money) and then hands it back to the master on his return illustrates exactly the sort of passive-aggressive response to God that Richard Rohr is talking about. I mean, his statement when the master returns is a classic expression of what is going on underneath in the passive-aggressive stance: "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

You hear that. "You are harsh. I was afraid. I carefully did nothing." If the other is perceived as harsh and you are afraid, you minimise the risks by avoiding doing anything that might possibly upset them and make them angry with you, and if you believe that they are erratic and unreasonable, then probably everything feels like something that could upset them and make them angry.

I can illustrate this beautifully from my dog training hobby. On most Saturday mornings I teach people how to train their dogs. Thirty years ago, most dog training was done by punishing mistakes. If we wanted a dog to walk at heel, we jerked it around with a choker collar whenever it moved away from the position we wanted. You can get a dog to heel that way, but the dog will heel because it is scared of making a mistake and invoking your angry jerk on the chain.

One of the big problems with that method is that when a dog that is scared of making mistakes can't quite work out what you want, it panics. It doesn't know what is the right thing to do, and it is terrified of doing the wrong thing, so what does it do? It freezes. It reduces the risk of doing the wrong thing by avoiding doing anything at all. Just like the bloke in our story.

Nowadays an increasing number of dog trainers train differently by ignoring mistakes and rewarding successes. A dog that has experienced very few punishments and fully expects to be rewarded has a very different attitude. If I stand still and say nothing in front of my dog Dusty with a treat visible in my hand, he's got no idea what he has to do to get me to give him the reward, but he doesn't freeze. He begins offering me behaviours. He sits. He lies down. He rolls over. He sits up and begs. He jumps over something. Why? Because he's not expecting to get whacked for getting it wrong; he's enthusiastically trying everything in the hope of getting something right. He doesn't expect bad consequences; he expects good ones.

Isn't that just what this parable is describing. The first two servants are like my dog. They don't imagine they are going to be punished for failing. They just seize their opportunity with both hands and make the most of whatever comes their way. They live freely, joyously, enthusiastically. They can take risks because they are not crippled by the expectation of punishment or disapproval. They take life as it comes and live it too full, and life lived to the full expands and multiplies and becomes even richer and fuller.

But the other one imagines the Lord differently. He represents those who imagine God to be demanding and punishing. They see God as a rigid disciplinarian who is watching to catch them out, to catch them slipping up, and any slip up will be punished. They imagine that God's only major concern is with rules and commandments and catching us out if we break them.

Their God is not one who overlooks most mistakes and celebrates every achievement. Quite the opposite. To them, God is one who measures our rewards in begrudging miserly handfuls, but sanctions and punishments come freely. So they freeze. They keep saying how wonderful God is to stave off his disapproval, but underneath they are resentful and hostile and paralysed, unable to let go and live freely or expansively. The risks are too high and the likelihood of reward too low. Nothing ventured, nothing lost. And they thus condemn themselves to a constricted and diminished and tormented life. Or is that death?

The contrast between these two is almost the gospel in a nutshell. If Richard Rohr is correct in saying that most of us have been brought up to imagine God as the cosmic disapproving judge who frightens us into hostile passivity, then Jesus came to save us from that misconception and its crippling consequences. Jesus came to reveal to us the true nature of God, the God who loves us generously and who is more than ready to overlook mistakes made as we throw ourselves into living joyously and fully.

Jesus was constantly criticised for precisely these things: for overlooking the gravity of people's obvious faults and celebrating the coming of the kingdom with them as though God wasn't overly concerned about them cleaning up their act first. The religious leaders, for whom an image of God as harsh judge is always a useful control mechanism, saw the image of God he promoted as a blasphemy. They want you fearful and thus controllable.

But Jesus came that you might have life and have it to the full. Jesus came that you might be set free from crippling fears and know that God is not the least bit interested in punishing or sneering at your failures and mistakes, but is eager to celebrate and reward your every endeavour to live with freedom and joy and expansive love.

This is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Your sins are forgiven in the blink of an eye. Throw yourself into life with love, joy, mercy and gusto, for there is no risk of upsetting God. Your every step of engagement with life in all its fullness fills God with joy and sets the angels dancing in celebration. And, just as happened in the parable, your investment in living will be abundantly rewarded with a life that keeps expanding and multiplying and overflowing to the glory of God.