

OPENING:

Frederick Buechner gave a sermon once on this strange and difficult parable entitled “The Stewardship of Pain” “The Stewardship of Pain.”¹

In the sermon, Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and author, tells a story about his childhood growing up in the Depression.

The story goes that Buechner’s family moved every year of his life because of economic hardship and how his father struggled with both keeping a job and with alcoholism.

One night, his father had been drinking too much and so Buechner’s mother hid her husband’s car keys by giving them to the 10-year-old Buechner and telling him to take the keys and under no circumstances give them up.

So Buechner goes upstairs to his bed, clutching the keys underneath his pillow. His father eventually comes up suspecting that that’s where the keys are, or perhaps his mother had revealed that very fact to him. Buechner’s father comes into the child’s bedroom and sit down on the empty twin bed opposite his son’s, pleading with him to give up the keys.

This exchange went on for what seemed like forever for Buechner with his mother eventually entering the room and shaming the father who, at some point, has broken into tears. Through it all, Buechner refuses and instead pulls the covers over his head, burying the keys ever deeper underneath his pillow until he falls asleep, never relinquishing them.

Many years later, after a successful life as an author and well-known religious thinker, Buechner told that story to a group at a retreat center. After it was done, a man came up to Buechner and said to him:

“You have had a good deal of pain in your life, and you have been a good steward of that pain.”

¹ Buechner, Frederick. “The Stewardship of Pain.” *Chicago Sunday Evening Club* (original air date: January 27, 1991) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73hdH1_z2ps. See also “Adolescence and the Stewardship of Pain” in Buechner, Frederick. 2006. *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco. 205-220.

Buechner was taken aback by that statement:

“You have been a good steward of that pain.”

He considered “stewardship” to be a rather boring/ ‘churchy’ word—usually associated with taking care of money or maybe the stateroom of an ocean liner.

He did not consider it a compliment, “being a good steward of his pain” but rather was haunted by the idea.

And so, Buechner asked himself what we might ask ourselves today:

“What does it mean to be a steward of pain?

How do you take care of the difficult things that you are given in your life?”²

GOSPEL:

Today we heard this uncomfortable parable, the Parable of the Talents, and today is also the last Sunday of our Stewardship Campaign.

I will try to connect those two with Buechner’s story as we think about God’s gifts in our lives, our stewardship of those gifts, along with our membership in this community, the Church of the Good Shepherd.

First, some housekeeping about the Gospel lesson:

1) Scholars tend to believe that this parable, at its core, was indeed told by the (quote unquote) “historical Jesus”, because if it were not, the early church would have undoubtedly done away with it. Since its depiction of the master figure is so harsh and severe, it must be authentic. So we are stuck with it.³

2) Second, there is a concept in sociology and economics that is derived from this passage, known as the “Matthew Effect.” Taken loosely from Matthew 25.29, it’s the concept of “accumulated advantage” where, in essence, the “rich get richer, and the poor get poorer.” The classic example is a child who is surrounded by books from infancy, who then learns to read early, who thus is placed in the highest reading groups in school, and so on.⁴

I don’t think that is the direction that Jesus is going with this in the parable, or that he’s arguing for a harsh version of exploitative capitalism, which would be antithetical to everything that he taught elsewhere.⁵

² Buechner “Adolescence and the Stewardship of Pain”, 211.

³ Gundry, Robert H. 1994. *Matthew: a Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 508; Keener, Craig S. 2009. *Gospel of Matthew: Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans., 561

⁴ See Gladwell, Malcolm. 2008. *Outliers: the Story of Success*. New York: Little, Brown and Co. The first chapter (“The Matthew Effect”) can be found here: <https://www.eaton.k12.oh.us/userfiles/257/Classes/5056/matthew%20effect.pdf>

⁵ Stanley Hauerwas. 2015. *Matthew* (Brazos Series) Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos., 209-210; Hendriksen, William. 1973. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBook House, 884

Parables are an invitation to explore a world larger than this one. They are an entryway into something deeper, something more important, something more holy than the normal run of affairs.

So, with the Parable of the Talents, we expect it to be about money, but a talent is such an incalculable, hyperbolic numerical sum (something like 50 years of wages) that I don't know if that's the direction we should go.

Instead, notice how the three slaves receive different amounts, different gifts. The master in the parable: God, Jesus, life, karma, genes, circumstances—however you want to look at it—provides us with varying amounts of good and bad in our mixed-up lives. They are all unearned because we don't deserve any of it, and unfair because we don't get to keep any of it. The question becomes, since we are all dealt hands that are in some way unfair, how are we then stewards of them?⁶

PAIN

Buechner admits that what he did with his gift, his pain, was to bury it, just like the 3rd slave. It was his only option, he was 10 years old and alone. So he dug a deep hole, like he did with the keys, he put that awful memory deep down and went on with his life.

He did not begrudge his childhood self for doing that, nor does he look down on others for doing the same, I think we all can recognize the tactic as a particularly American one of dealing with pain, maybe a particularly 20th century one, definitely a particularly masculine way of dealing with pain.

Another tactic, of course, is that you allow that pain to fester, so to control and dominate you. We all know people, we have all been those people, who have enabled a setback/ a loss/ a tragedy to make us bitter, entitled, fearful, and scared.

Either way, like the 3rd slave, you bury the pain, bury the talents, bury the gift, and by doing so you end up burying yourself in your own misery and pain and bitterness.⁷

⁶ Buechner, 214.

⁷ Hendriksen, 883.

REDEMPTION

The parable provides another option for the stewardship of pain, that of “trading.” It keeps the metaphor of business and commerce but it sees pain as its own form of treasure, a treasure because the pain can become compassion and healing and knowledge of others’ pain.

In the course of Buechner’s life, by the grace of God, he managed to do something like that with his pain, he was able to unearth those buried memories, to transform that pain into something else. He did so through his novels, and books, and teaching, and preaching. He traded the one for the other and ended up vastly richer for it.

Buechner explained such a trading of pain in this way:

“I have what you need, which is me; you have what I need, which is you.”

He told the story of that pain in such a way that it unlocked, like a key in a door, something inside himself and others where all received a great gift.

CONCLUSION:

Buechner told stories in response to his pain, what will we do?

How will Good Shepherd tell its story of COVID-19 in the year of our Lord 2020?

How will we tell the story of our pain, and our gifts, and our talents?

What if we pledge to keep trading our stories, our very selves, trusting that each other will be good stewards of them?

I don’t know how I would have answered these questions before March:

“Do we need each other? Really?”

Can we bear each other’s pain?”

Now I know the answer, unequivocally ‘YES’ and ‘YES’! We have been and we have got to continue to be good stewards of each other’s pain.

So the hope and prayer is that we will give in faith, and in trust, not because we have earned it, or because we expect something back, but that we know the source of all life is the one who says “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

AMEN.