

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

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Is Faith a Numbers Game?

Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Philippians 2:12-18; Matthew 25:14-30

It's all about the numbers. That's what we hear about college admissions, class rank, standardized test scores. You've got to have those numbers.

A recent story in the news described the high pressure and high stakes for Korean young people taking the annual college entrance exam in their country. A single exam that lasts eight hours determines if a student will go to college and which college they will attend. Given a rather rigid connection between schools and the ultimate job market, this one test sets the course for the young person's adult life.

On the day the test is administered, the younger grades are all dismissed from school so that there won't be any noise in the building. And this is the one that amazed me! Aircraft in the whole country are forbidden to either take off or land during those hours so that the test takers won't be distracted. Now, that's a high-stakes test.

Recently, some colleges in Korea began asking students to submit essays as part of the admissions process. They said they want to look at the broader person, not just at a single score, but not everyone is in favor of that. "Numbers don't lie," the traditionalists say. Indeed, they feel that introducing a subjective element into the admission process may make it less fair.

That's one of the reasons that tests such as the SAT or the ACT were introduced in our own country many decades ago. It was done out of a concern to have national standards but also to maximize those chances that a smart kid from a less-than-privileged background would have a good chance. At least that's one side of the argument. Unfortunately, study after study has shown that the single factor that correlates best to the level of performance on standardized tests is parental income. That does not mean that a poor kid can't score well, or that a rich kid can't mess up. But, they are the exception, not the rule. Of course, that other side of the argument finds its expression in the bumper sticker that reads: "My child is more than a test score." Indeed.

Yet, we live in a culture that is obsessed with numbers, or at least is highly

competitive about things that can be measured. We compare football teams by their win/loss record. How else would we do it? How nice the players are? We compare companies by their quarterly results, not by how well they treat their employees or even their customers. We compare participants in a weight-loss contest by how many pounds they shed, colleges by the number of applicants they receive and what percentage they reject.

And what of the Christian life? Are there things that we should measure and weigh to make sure we are on God's side? Is there a standard we should be striving to meet, or even surpass? Is there a ranking system that tells us where we stand?

Now those sound a bit silly, don't they? And yet these are questions we need at least to ask if we consider this story of the three servants and their talents to be a parable of the kingdom. The first servant uses the master's capital to buy and sell, to invest and trade, to wheel and deal and make a large profit. He is commended by the master and put in charge of more. A second servant, likewise, makes a large sum of money even larger, receives the approval of the master and is given an even bigger role in the master's business enterprise. But a third servant, hapless as he seems, fails to turn a profit. The master curses him, calls him names, and throws him into a place of torment.

This is a hard story, and interpreters have wrestled with it for generations. The most anodyne reading goes something like this: God gives us gifts; God gives us talents, and as we use those gifts to the glory of God, they are multiplied many times over. We should never bury them in the ground or hide them away. If you've been around a church very much, I am sure that you have heard a sermon much like this. I know that I have preached it more than a time or two. And it makes a valid point about the Christian life. We need to use our gifts. We need to share our talents and our treasure, and they are multiplied many times as we do.

The problem is that this point, however valid it might be, does not neatly match the details of the Scripture passage.

This is not a story about talents, in the sense of the ability or natural endowment. It is a story about money. Large sums of money, measured according to the largest monetary unit in the ancient world.

It's not a story about gifts and giving, because nothing is given away in this story.

It can only be earned, and even that can be taken away. A gift which can be revoked is never really a gift in the first place. Gifts are given unconditionally, and there seem to be quite a few conditions in this tale.

Of course, the traditional reading of the story contends that what we have in front of us is a parable of the kingdom, and it needs to be read allegorically. The master is a figure for God, but if this is so, what is a troubling way to depict God. He is an absentee business owner who seems to care only about how much profit his workers or servants can generate. He is hardhearted, he is cruel, and he espouses a philosophy which holds that the rich deserve more, and the poor ought to have less. A friend of mine recently said, “This doesn’t sound like God to me. This sounds like the Godfather.”

We need to understand that in the ancient world, there were not many ways to amass a great sum of money. There was no Microsoft or Google leveraging raw ingenuity and new ideas to generate jobs and capital. No, in an ancient agrarian society, you made money, the big money, by doing things that were either criminal or morally suspect by the standards of the day and even by our own: extortion, taxation, buying and hoarding commodities, charging exorbitant interest rates, or expropriating land which belonged to others.

When Jesus’ original audience heard that the two “successful” servants had doubled the talents entrusted to them, that audience would have winced. How did the servants do this in a seemingly short period of time while the master was away? In our world, we like to talk about stories of unlikely success. We want to talk about winners. But, Jewish peasants of the first century would not have applauded this feat. For them, the ideal was stability, not self-advancement. The concentration of wealth was considered dangerous to the fabric of a just and harmonious social order. They would have worried about what family had lost its land to foreclosure, what people had been defrauded, and about those who had been reduced to borrowing money at illegal rates because of their desperate straits. The first hearers would have been thinking about victims.

There is one more problem with calling this story a “parable of the kingdom.” Jesus himself (Matthew, if you will) does not give it that title. To introduce such parables, Jesus usually begins, “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”, and then he weaves his tale. This story starts with a word of comparison. “It is like,” or “Just as (...),” but there is no stated

antecedent. We cannot say, from the original Greek, to what Jesus refers. It may be a parable of a kingdom, but perhaps an earthly kingdom that Jesus is warning us to avoid.

The story which follows today's lesson describes a scene of final judgment. People separated into groups — goats who have failed to respond to the needs of others and sheep who have responded to the needs of the thirsty, the stranger, the sick and the naked. The sheep are rewarded, not according to the profit they have created, but according to the charity they have shown.

So what are we to make of that third servant, the one who takes the money entrusted to him and buries it in the ground? He's failed at managing his hedge fund. At least, that is the verdict of the master in the story, though I'd have to say that if it were told for Autumn, 2008, we would want to laud his prudent approach. He didn't get caught up in the latest financial craze. He didn't leverage the capital to buy over-priced assets. He didn't invest in derivatives or mortgage-backed securities. He did not put his money in a bank that was about to fail. So we can compare his results to the wizards of Wall Street whose losses tally well into the trillions now. This guy didn't lose a dime.

He buried it in the ground.

There must be symbolic significance in that though it was not an uncommon action in the ancient world. Pillaging armies did it, buried the loot when there was too much to carry all the way home. And in anticipation of *being* looted, people would often bury their valuables to hide and protect them. Jesus tells another parable about a man who discovers a treasure that has been buried and abandoned in a field.

This third servant claims that he buried the money out of fear, but it may not have been fear for himself, but fear for others and what that money might have done to them. "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed." The accusations are true. The master's wealth is derived entirely from the toil of others. He does not plant. He does not till. He does not sow, but he does reap as he uses his money to gain control over the labors of others.

And this third servant says, "I want no part of that." He resists the ill-gotten gain. He blows the whistle on the latest get-rich-quick scam. He chooses not to play the numbers game. It's the quality of life and relationships that matters.

And, of course he knows, yes, there will be a price to pay. In anger the master calls

him names. But remember who is telling this story, and what happens to him. Jesus speaks uncomfortable truths and faces the scorn of the world, the rejection of his own people, and betrayal by those closest to him.

Next, the master strips the servant of what little he has. Again, the one telling the story will be scourged and stripped, his few possessions taken away and handed to others.

Finally, the master throws the servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the teller of this story? How much outer darkness and weeping Jesus experiences upon the cross!

Jesus said, "I came not to be served, but to serve." Our servant Savior. Before him all of our human measures become quite meaningless. All of our strivings are empty. We cannot earn our way into the kingdom. We can only accept the gift or reject it. And in the meantime, not be so quick to figure out who the winners and who the losers are. Because Jesus, by the standards of his day, was the biggest loser of all. But in his death, Jesus buries the numbers game. There is only one thing that really counts: and that is love.

Amen.

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For further reading on this subject, you may read the article "The Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30)" (excerpted from "Towering Trees and Talented Slaves" Ched Myers and Eric DeBode) on the internet at:

<http://www.lwwdc.org/Talents.htm>