

MADE IN THE IMAGE

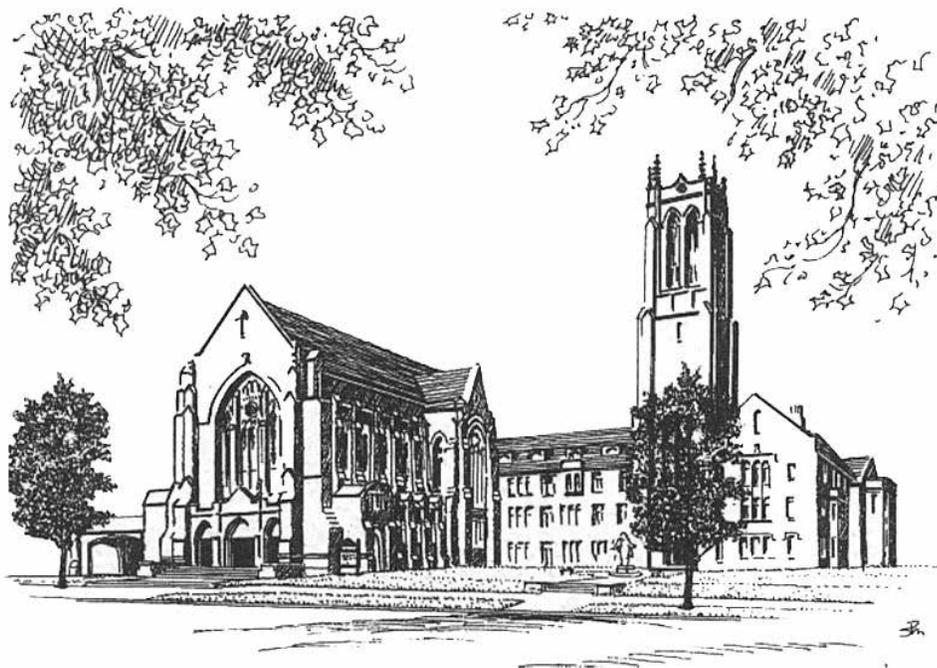
by

Rev. Danny Yang

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8:30 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Texts: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123 or Psalm 7; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; and Matthew 25:14-30

In the past few years, there's a fashion trend among young people that I've enjoyed quite a bit. Probably fueled by the internet as well as pop TV shows, we now have a plethora of personalized, humorous T-shirts. Each of us can find a T-shirt to express our brand of humor and reveal a bit of our personality. I spent a little time, probably too much, looking up the latest designs for purchase.

With Christmas approaching — there's a T-shirt of Mary holding the baby Jesus with the tagline "Abstinence: 99.9999999% Effective." Another design shows two socks, with one telling the other, "Get Lost." And an apologetic red T-shirt that says, "I'm Sorry for What I Said When I Was Hungry."

When I was a student at Candler School of Theology, I spent a year working with Emory undergraduate students in the Asian-American Christian Fellowship and definitely got to see all types of witty T-shirts. But there is one shirt that always stands out in my memory. One of our Korean-American students had a favorite shirt that simply said "No Good at Math." Now, that is a very clever shirt as she protested against the common Asian-American stereotype: great at numbers and science, not so much anything else.

The stereotype of Asian-Americans as a model minority is actually quite insidious. The problem with this model minority myth is multiple, so let's embark on a one minute Asian-American studies lesson. This idea of a model minority actually conceals vast diversity within the Asian-American community. When we disaggregate the data, there are distinct populations with vastly different experiences. The relative success of immigrants from East and South Asia who came to America for higher education and economic opportunities blinds us to the struggles of communities that immigrated here as refugees of war-torn countries from Southeast Asia.

Even more pernicious is simply the idea of a model minority. Whoever conjured this idea somehow thought it would be appropriate to pit and com-

pare minority groups. Which naturally begs the question: who gets to define model behavior? Approached this way, the model minority myth becomes a means of social control by groups seated in power to dictate the behavior deemed proper for minorities.

Despite these objections, the myth persists. Just this month, a popular news personality began to talk about “Asian privilege” as an example of how white privilege has been trumped. Why do people continue to cling and rehash the model minority myth?

I believe the lingering appeal rests in its correspondence to the American dream. We want to believe that the playing field is equal and every person has the same opportunity for success and the same chance in our pursuits of happiness. We prefer not to acknowledge that privilege exists or that people have advantages based on class, race, gender, or sexuality. And so if a group of recent immigrants can achieve success, it proves that our individual successes and failures are a consequence of our own individual decisions and actions. The model minority myth persists because it seems to prove that the American dream is accessible to everyone, and no one has any excuse for failure.

And when we approach the gospel lesson, that same appeal to individual agency and responsibility can appear to be at work in the parable of the talents. It’s perhaps more nuanced, as different servants receive different amounts based on their ability, but we end up in the same spot: our fate is what we make. The first two servants make choices that earn the master’s favor, and the third servant is rightly cast into the outer darkness. Wherever you end up, it was your own doing, your own choices, and your own decisions.

But if this is the teaching of the parable, here’s my own worrisome thought: which servant am I?

And to be clear, we do not want to be the third servant. There are some various interpretations that try to euphemize the outer darkness expression, but plainly it is not a desirable destination.

So how confident are you that you have doubled the talents loaned to you from the master?

When's the last time you checked your portfolio for the master?

Is there some website I can visit to track my progress so I can eventually breathe a sigh of relief?

Perhaps more troubling is where this thinking leads us. Let's be bold and say that we've made it; a bell was rung and each of our personal guardian angels earned their wings. When someone asks us, "How can you be so free of anxiety at the master's return?" our reply will become a list of wise investments that we made, market-timed deals, and overall performance. Our confidence has become works-based, a contest of achievement. Should someone ask us, "How can I be saved?" — we would answer, "Work hard and double the master's talents."

Is this really the destination and intent of the parable — to divide humanity into two groups: overachievers and deadbeats?

Let's try something with this parable; let us redact the third servant from the story. Listen again with fresh ears, and think about how the emotional impact of the parable changes.

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. After a long time the master came and settled accounts with them.

Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more."

His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more.”

His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

That is a different parable, isn't it? At least for me, the fear and anxiety is gone. It becomes a story of stewardship and reunion. The scary, harsh edge of the parable is gone. I believe Matthew wants us to see the stark contrast between the first two servants and the third. The parable creates a binary parallel between their experiences. Good versus wicked. Trustworthy versus lazy. More given versus taken away. Joy versus weeping and gnashing. The parable invites us to reflect on why the experiences are so different.

Let's introduce the third servant again. Listen to what he says about the master, “I knew that you were a harsh man.”

His relationship to the master is based on fear. In this sense, the third servant actually acts in a very rational manner. In rabbinic thought, the most secure place to preserve money is to bury it. Motivated by fear, he found the safest place to put the money because even banks can fail. The fear of the master paralyzes the third servant. It helps for me to think about what the servant was hoping to happen, the end goal of his actions. It seems the highest hope for the third servant is safety and self-preservation, to escape judgement.

By hearing the third servant, we can better understand the first two servants. In this parable, a talent is an absurd amount of money, so Matthew is playing with extremes in the story. It points to both the extravagance of the master as well as the level of trust given to the servants. And any introduction to economics tells us in order to make money you must risk money. If you've ever opened a 401k plan, then you will be familiar with the investment style quiz where they ask you to imagine how you would feel to make or lose vari-

ous amounts of money to gauge your risk tolerance level. And doubling money is not easy; if any one here can guarantee of a 100 percent return investment, sign me up! But we all know the adage: past performance is no guarantee of future results. So for the first two servants to double the millions placed in their care would require an uncomfortable amount of risk, risk that keeps you up at night — especially when you are playing with your boss's money.

Unless they are not afraid of the master. Unless they do not see the master as a harsh man. Unless the outer darkness never crosses their minds as a possible destination. They take the risk because they have a relationship beyond fear. In contrast to the third servant, who hoped only for self-preservation, the first two servants hoped for the joy of the master. It is an excitement that anticipates and eagerly awaits the return of their master.

This connection between relationship and risk-taking finds a fascinating parallel in the field of child development. Attachment theory explores the bond between a caregiver and child. The bond is tested by what researchers call "The Strange Situation." In the experiment, the caregiver and child play in an unfamiliar environment, and different scenarios are introduced, including the presence of a stranger as well as the leaving and return of the caregiver.

When a child has what researchers call a secure attachment to the caregiver, two things are noteworthy. First, the child is free to explore the room and engage the stranger. Second, the child expresses obvious joy and relief when the caregiver returns to the room after leaving.

Can you see the parable of the talents appearing in attachment theory?

A strong secure attachment is one where the child feels safe and the child trusts the caregiver. Notice that what matters here is the perception of the child. A caregiver can be just as nurturing, just as protective, just as loving as another caregiver, but if the child does not see the caregiver in that light, the secure attachment does not happen. And when the child has that secure attachment, that sense of safety, the child can take risks and the child can explore the room. The child's behavior is shaped by how he or she sees the caregiver.

Like attachment theory and the parable of the talents, we are the same way: we are made in the image of how we perceive GOD. Our ability to take risks reflects how we see GOD. If we see GOD as harsh and punishing, we will protect ourselves. If GOD seems absent or distant to us, then we will ignore GOD or oblige GOD. But our deep longing and yearning is for that secure attachment to a faithful GOD, to be made in the image of that GOD.

Our first two lessons in Scripture reflect a secure attachment to GOD. In Judges, the Israelites cry out to the LORD for help because they know the LORD will respond not as a harsh and punishing god, but as the LORD — slow to anger and rich in love. Paul writes to the Thessalonians and tells them not to fear the day of the LORD, because of relationship. And he points to our clearest expression of who GOD is when he tells us that we “obtain salvation through Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that... we may live with him.”

The parable of the talents gives us a powerful way of gauging our relationship and perception of GOD. What risks have we taken with what GOD has given us?

I promise you we did not time our stewardship campaign to coincide with this parable, but it does make me pause and reflect: When I give, what is my perception of GOD?

What does my pledge reveal about how I see GOD?

Do I give out of guilt or duty? Or does my giving come from a place of safety and trust?

But beyond finances, what are the bold risks you have taken?

We have been given gifts of not just money, but also of time, skills, friendships, and resources. What risks have you taken with your career?

What risks have you taken in your neighborhood?

What risks have you taken in your life to magnify the kingdom of GOD and reflect the image of your GOD?

That's the beauty of this parable: when we begin to see GOD rightly, then we are freed to take these bold risks. A secure relationship releases us from

the grip of fear, and enables us to relish the joy of GOD that can only be experienced by leaps of faith. To be securely attached to our loving GOD creates an excited anticipation to share life with not just GOD, but GOD's whole creation. And we do this, not to earn salvation or to escape condemnation; we do this in order to bask in the joy of our Master.

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeyer at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.