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Text: Matthew 25: 14-30
“What You Pay Attention to Grows”
November 15, 2020

Church, I'll be honest with you, when I first saw that the Parable of the Talents was the Gospel text for this Sunday, I thought, “Oooof, that's a lot. I don't want to preach on this.” As I read through the text, it seemed like every other word was “slave.” Good slaves entering the master's joy, gnashing of teeth for the worthless slaves. It is hard to stomach slaves being used as a metaphor in our contemporary context, as we grapple with centuries of enslavement that have shaped this nation's history and are alive and shaping today. Why is slavery so present in our sacred texts? What happens when we uplift this language as sacred story? These questions are worthy challenges for us and could be asked again and again. Yet, as I sat with the text, I found my spirit being pulled in another direction, perhaps not unrelated. I found myself asking, What about God's kin-dom and how we get there, is Jesus revealing in this parable? How is Jesus inviting us through this story, these metaphors, to encounter the God of love and justice? As I prayed with these questions, what emerged in response were the words of writer and activist adrienne maree brown, “What you pay attention to grows.”

Like many biblical scholars, I tend to interpret the Gospel parables as one way that Jesus invites the disciples and us to expand what is thought possible and to image ourselves co-creating God's kin-dom on earth. The parables are a storytelling strategy through which Jesus teaches spiritual practices and forms disciples to be kin-dom makers. There's the Parable of the Sower who sows seeds on different kinds of soil. Some foundations nourish life, some do not. Last Sunday we heard Jesus tell the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. Matthew 25:1 began, “Then the kin-dom of heaven will be like this...,” and ends by saying, “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.” The kin-dom of heaven will be like this...keep awake. In the bridesmaid parable, we could interpret Jesus teaching that the kin-dom of God is breaking in all around us, in surprising ways and at unexpected times. Keep your lamps trimmed and burning sings the African-American spiritual -- keep your spirit nourished, ready, attuned to God's kin-dom. It's this “keep awake” verse that leads directly into today's Parable of the Talents. The parables are building upon one another. Jesus is reminding us again and again of our discipleship-calling. When God's kin-dom comes on earth, how will we respond? What will we be paying attention to?

[adrienne maree brown](#) writes, “attention is one of our most valuable resources [...] what we pay attention to grows.” If you are not already familiar with adrienne's work, I invite you to start paying attention to her. She is one of the many prophets of this time. A writer, pleasure activist, sci-fi scholar, facilitator and doula, adrienne is formed by the prophetic visions of Octavia Butler and Grace Lee Boggs, and she is helping form a world that can “imagine a new possible into being.” She has helped facilitate and witnessed this kind of healing and transformational work within and through the Movement for Black Lives and has committed her life to “building compelling futures that makes us want to survive.” To do this, adrienne asserts that our attention is liberation. She says, “i pay attention to the places we as a species are learning, changing, getting free, experiencing pleasure and joy [...] let us put our attention on a revolution for our

species, and grow it until we earn the miracle.” I believe it is this kind of liberative attention that Jesus is calling us towards in today’s scripture.

In Matthew’s Parable of the Talents, we are introduced to three workers and their employer. The employer is about to travel for a long period of time and in his absence, puts the employees in charge of the talents, the money. The first worker is charged with five talents, the largest sum out of the three workers. This person begins trading the talents, the money and makes a large profit. The second worker is given two talents. They also begin trading the talents and make a profit. The third person is given one talent. We are told that they are scared of their employer so rather than taking risks with the one talent, they bury it so that nothing happens to it. When the employer returns, he is greatly pleased with the first two employees who made him a profit and he rewards them. Likewise, he greatly displeased with the employee who buried the talent and he punishes him. The workers with more resources get more and the worker with the least is punished. This is another challenging part of this text. It is hard to reconcile the Jesus in this story who seems to say, “those with more get more,” with the Jesus who later in this chapter says, “What you do to the least of these, you do to me.” But if we take this parable, like the others, as unfolding metaphors for God’s kin-dom, then perhaps Jesus is not saying, those with the most talents/money will get more money. Rather, those who give their gifts, their lives to the kin-dom of God will grow the kin-dom of God. In this way, what if we reimagine the talents invested by these characters not as money, but as attention. What comes into view if we ask, how is Jesus inviting us to consider the ways in which we pay attention and how that does or does not grow God’s kin-dom?

Two people in this parable invest all of their talents, their attention and their resources multiply. In their own ways, they direct their attention—their thoughts, their emotional energy, their relational capacity, their resources, leadership and voice to the possibility of a new day. In directing their attention, they see their hopes grow. Let’s imagine this together.

The first person takes all of their attention and directs their gifts towards co-creating God’s kin-dom on earth. If Jesus in this parable is inviting us to keep awake, to pay attention, perhaps the metaphor of the talents invites us to imagine this first person:

1. paying attention to their spiritual energy through imagination and meditation. Here they find their breath and stretch their soul towards the voices of hope.
2. paying attention to the people around them, committing their relational gifts towards building communities for freedom.
3. paying attention to the problems of the world so that they can give to, believe in, and be part of the solutions.
4. paying attention to voices for justice whose visions they may not yet fully understand or relate to.
5. paying attention to what joy feels like in their body and looks like in their community, and making more space for that.

And as they pay attention, hope grows, freedom grows, solutions grow, justice grows, joy grows and the kin-dom of God draws near.

The second person, even with more limited resources, takes all of their attention and directs their gifts towards co-creating God’s kin-dom on earth. If Jesus in this parable is inviting us to keep

awake, to pay attention, perhaps the metaphor of the talents invites us to imagine this second person:

1. paying attention to their relationship with the earth and material goods, seeking out and creating pathways for sustainability.
2. paying attention to the world with gratitude, noticing the small and big wonders emerging all around.

And as they pay attention, sustainability grows, gratitude grows, and the kin-dom of God draws near.

The third person however, their attention was focused elsewhere. They take all of their attention and bury their gifts. If Jesus in this parable is inviting us to keep awake, to pay attention, perhaps the metaphor of the talents invites us to imagine this third person:

1. paying attention to systems that say these visions for justice are not practical or possible
2. paying attention to fear that there will not be enough
3. paying attention to feelings of scarcity that cause us to want to hoard our resources
4. paying attention to their own individual wellbeing to the exclusion of the wellbeing of their neighbors

And as they pay attention, injustice grows, fear grows, scarcity grows, exclusion grows and the kin-dom of God seems far away.

God's kin-dom of joy, justice and freedom will grow on earth if we pay attention to it. No joy is out of reach with God. No justice is impossible with God. No freedom is too big with God. adrienne maree brown offers this mantra for helping us embody and remind ourselves of the truth that what we pay attention to grows:

“i practice what i want to become.
we practice what we want to create.”

To me, this is what it means to be church. In everything we do we practice God's kin-dom. We practice God's kin-dom in every meeting, God's kin-dom in every activity, God's kin-dom in every worship service. We practice God's kin-dom and “grow it until we earn the miracle.”

As Christians, we are about to begin the season of Advent, the season of watchful waiting for God's in-breaking on earth. What visions, whose voices, what practices will you pay attention to in this new season, so that God's life on earth can grow?