

Judges 4:1-7

Matthew 25:14-30

As a hospital chaplain, I have witnessed stories of hope that are inspired in patients through the impact of loved ones and communities that were not present for me to see. I was able to witness this inspiring love in one family when I was asked to help a young mother complete Advance Directives paperwork to name her health care power of attorney and indicate that she wanted to receive as much medical treatment as possible to stay alive, no matter how painful or costly it was for her.

As we talked, I noticed that she seemed afraid. This seemed like a normal response for someone receiving treatment in the hospital. I thought, "Perhaps she was afraid of the pain she might experience, or even personal losses she might experience from her illness." As we spoke, we were alone in the hospital room, so I assumed her feelings were just about her. My experience with her story showed me the power of knowing the characters who aren't in the room. After completing the forms, I asked this woman why she wanted to fill out this paperwork. She told me she had cancer and wanted to do everything she could to keep loving her young children and husband. She needed to stay alive so she could take care of them, no matter the cost. Her babies were more important to her than her own life, and for her, being alive to support them and see them grow up was her reason to live. We prayed together for her family and for her health as she prepared for treatment that day.

In our Hebrew scripture lesson today from the book of Judges, we learn about the story of Deborah, the great judge who the Israelites sang about as "the mother of Israel." Judges functioned as political leaders who were given power over military and domestic issues as well as acting as judge in family and legal matters.

The book of Judges describes the cycle of relationship between God and the Israelites after they settle in the land of Canaan that had been promised to their ancestors by God. The cycle starts when a great leader dies and the people's faith in God dies with that generation. A new generation grows up without the experience of God's miracles or the leadership of a great judge who calls them into right relationship. So the new generation does not know God and turns to other gods when life gets difficult. Many married into local families who had their own gods and took up the worship of these other gods as part of their new culture. The God of Abraham is said to empower other local peoples to rise up and oppress the Israelites hoping this would force them to return to right relationship with God. God would send them judges to deliver them out of their captivity again and again, but the people "did not listen even to their judges, for they lusted after other gods and bowed down to them."

So when the Israelites come looking for Deborah to be their leader, they know she is a judge sent to them by God to deliver them from their Canaanite oppressors. They know they are in need of a leader to bring them back into right relationship with God. In addition to her legal, political and military leadership, Deborah is the only judge who is also a prophet - a vessel for divine communications. With this divine connection, she leads her people to victory over their powerful rival and brings the Israelites back into right relationship with God.

Deborah is chosen by God which upsets the patriarchy of scribes and religious leaders who would later write down this important story. It demonstrates that the male dominated social structures were a product of their culture and not a mandate from God. In many ways, the story tellers and singers that maintained Deborah's narrative and Deborah's song are missing characters in this story. Their love and devotion for this powerful mother of Israel allow countless generations to experience

the radical nature of our liberating God who sends messengers with vulnerable identities to declare God's powerful message of love and covenant.

Despite the message delivered to the people through Deborah, the people continue in the cycle after she dies - returning again to "do what was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Is this cycle not familiar to us? We have all come to be part of this community of faith through some experience of connection and deliverance with God that has led us to seek right relationship with God. The inspiration of our faith draws us close to God and inspires us to live out God's love for humanity in our relationships with others in our community.

But even the most faithful of us experience moments of doubt, moments of despair that lead us into dark places where we cannot love ourselves and can abandon our feeble efforts to create the loving kingdom of God here on earth. This daunting task can weigh on anyone who continues to wait in hope for Jesus' return with no end to the waiting in sight.

The writer of Matthew is thought to be writing to a community of Jesus followers who are experiencing this kind of doubt and lapse in faith. By the late first century, the hopes of early Christians that Jesus would return in their lifetime were being crushed by their continued waiting under the oppressive Roman Empire. Continuing to wait in hope provided greater and greater challenges. Maintaining a right relationship with God as the generation of Jesus' original disciples began to die required new inspiration for faith and new ways of living.

The parable I read this morning is part of a series of parables of Jesus that Matthew places together to provide some new inspiration for keeping the faith. Many scholars believe this parable affirms "both the delay of Jesus' return and that it describes proper action in the interim period". This comes from a tradition of interpreting the parable as an allegory, where the "master" represents God and the "slaves" represent the people. Working hard for the profits of God lead to being in "the joy of your master." This is a great moral for this story, but as with the young mother who I met in her hospital bed, I believe there are more characters inspiring this parable than the ones mentioned.

Jesus has a history of talking about money, and it is always pretty challenging to me and very challenging to our cultural values as a capitalist society. Among his many rebukes of money, we heard this year that Jesus demanded that the rich young man sell all his possessions and give his money to the poor in order to follow him. In this parable, Jesus was also talking to a peasant audience of followers - his disciples who had left Jerusalem with him after turning over the tables in the temple.

I ask you to look at this parable through a lens that - like Jesus - is critical of those in power. The master is just a man who owns slaves and great wealth. The slaves are themselves slaves of a powerful man who are given authority over great sums of money - millions of dollars by today's standards.

With these characters identified in this literal way, the important question for Jesus here is "who do you serve?" The first two slaves align themselves with the master - going off at once to multiply the wealth they have been entrusted with.

So how exactly did they double the master's money? The verb used in the NRSV translation is "trade." They "went off at once and traded" with their new fortune. In that time, similar to today, the only forms of trade that could double your money were very risky investments that often had very high moral costs. Like the pay-day loan companies that prey on low income communities here in Chicago by providing short term loans with sky-rocketing interest that can get over 400% of the original loan. Risky investments like oil companies that displace indigenous communities by force in Iraq, Latin America and our own country in order to extract the valuable oil that fuels our carbon economy.

The risky high return investments in Jesus' Palestinian context would have been similarly exploitative - loaning money to peasant farmers so they can pay the rising Roman taxes that often led to default - allowing investors to take possession of their land and create a landless peasant working class.

In this context, the first two slaves are only their master - a false God of money and power.

It is the third slave that serves the people and the calling of God by burying his fortune in the ground. By refusing to participate in the exploitative market place that was available to him for the service of his human master, this slave is maintaining his moral mandate to respect the lives of his community. He is identifying with the peasant farming community and seeking to live in relationship with them rather than remain in the safety of his position as a slave of a "harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed."

This slave teaches us that living in right relationship with God requires risk. This third slave risks his life to serve the vulnerable community that lived around him. This third slave spoke out against the exploitation of his community by his master and refused to participate. For this, the slave was thrown into the dark dungeon where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jesus shares this parable with followers from a Jewish society that continued in the storied cycle of sin and faithfulness to God. We too live in a society and in specific communities that can fall into these cycles in our relationship to God and each other.

Today, after worship, we continue our series of Discernment Gatherings by asking the question, "How can we serve each other as a congregation?"

I believe we can learn from this third slave by seeking to hold back the tide of exploitation and violence against each other that can seem to come in from all sides. We can seek to serve each other by lifting up the gifts of God that are present in each of us and finding new ways to help each other shine as God's beloveds. We can seek to serve each other by learning from one another by listening to the perspectives that we share and the perspectives that are unique for each of us.

I believe it was through a strong commitment to the message of Jesus to love God and love neighbor that this third slave was able to remain faithful to his community by refusing to exploit them for personal and financial gain. It is only through deep connection to those around us that we discover the bonds of love that inspire us to live a life devoted to others.

Months after my initial conversation with the woman in the hospital who wanted to defeat her cancer to live for her family, I got to meet that family. They were present with her during the last days of her life as the cancer spread faster than anyone could have predicted. This family was inspired by her love and was just as committed to living for her. I know she will continue to inspire love in her husband and her children even as she has now gone to be with God. They are definitely worth living for.

God also chose to live for us despite our brokenness. So as we turn to a time of prayer and reflection, I ask that you consider how you might serve your siblings in Christ that are part of this congregation. I ask that you consider what perspective you can share that would help others to provide that same love in service for you.

We are the body of Christ when we gather together. Let us serve Christ by serving each other this day and in the days to come.