

BIBLE READING: Matthew 25:14-30

SERMON

“For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

These are the chilling words that end the “Parable of the Talents,” our Gospel reading for this twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost. No doubt you know the story: a wealthy man summons three of his slaves and entrusts them with “talents.” Then he goes away “for a long time.” While he’s gone, two of his slaves invest the money they’ve been given, and make huge profits for their master. The third slave, meanwhile, digs a hole in the ground and buries the single talent that was given to him. When the master returns, the slaves who’ve turned a profit are commended, gifted with more wealth, and invited to “enter into the joy” of their master. But the third slave is called “wicked,” “lazy,” and “worthless,” and cast into the outer darkness.

This is a story we usually associate with stewardship. As in: our Master (God) has entrusted each one of us with “talents” (money, assets, abilities, strengths), and God expects us to invest those talents boldly and creatively for the sake of the Kingdom. If we do so, God will praise and reward us accordingly. But if we “bury” our talents, refusing to invest them as God desires, God will consider us “worthless” stewards, and we will suffer the unpleasant consequences of our master’s displeasure.

In case it isn’t obvious already, I’m not fond of this all-too-common interpretation. I worry about the unexamined assumption at its heart — the assumption that the slavemaster in the story is God. Someone once said, “How you hear a parable has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from.”

If we’re okay with descriptions of God that render God (even metaphorically) as a harsh and punitive slave master, then who represents us in the parable? Who are we inadvertently erasing or harming for the sake of a tidy sermon series on tithes and offerings? What histories, legacies, and communities are we sidelining when we refuse to interrogate toxic representations of the Divine?

For me, the metaphor of God-as-wealthy-slave-master doesn’t align with the gracious and justice-oriented God Jesus describes throughout the Gospels — the God who privileges the poor, blesses the meek, frees the prisoner, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, liberates the slave, and protects the orphan. I can’t reconcile the God Jesus incarnates among the peasant multitudes with a greedy estate owner who “reaps where he doesn’t sow, and gathers where he doesn’t scatter.” And I don’t recognize the kingdom of God in a story where those who have plenty receive still more, while those who have close to nothing lose even the little they have — and then face God’s wrath on top of those losses.

So how can we read it? As it turns out, it is very possible to read the third slave as the “hero” of the story. Moreover, the story makes more sense — and aligns more beautifully with the God Jesus describes in the Gospels — if we read it this way. Specifically, the parable works better if we read it descriptively rather than prescriptively. What if the parable is not about a punishing God at all? What if it’s about us? What if it’s about life on earth as it is, here and now?

First, some context: In Jesus’s day, “talents” were not coins or small amounts of money. They were hefty precious metals (usually gold or silver) that weighed somewhere between 40 to 60 kilograms. A single talent was worth approximately twenty years of an

ordinary laborer's wages. In other words, a talent represented a staggering amount of money to Jesus's peasant audience. An unthinkable, lottery-jackpot-sum that only the wealthiest might possess.

How did the wealthy amass that kind of wealth? They lent money to the farming poor at exorbitant interest, and systematically stripped those debtors of their land. Often the people who took such loans did so out of desperation, putting their fields up as collateral in last-ditch efforts to save their livelihoods. Inevitably, their efforts would fail. Drought would hit, or a debtor would grow ill, or a crop would yield too little. At that point, the staggering interest rates a farmer agreed to would kick in and force foreclosure, and the poor man would have no choice but to surrender his ancestral land, watch as the wealthy repurpose his fields for profit, and join the multitudes of landless day labourers who couldn't know from day to day where their bread would come from.

This is the situation Jesus describes in the Parable of the Talents. The three slaves in the story are the wealthy master's "retainers" or household bureaucrats — essentially, the middle-men who oversee the land and the workers, collect the debts, and keep the profits coming while the master travels on business. It is understood by everyone involved that the slaves are free to make a little extra on the side — by charging the farmers additional fees or interest — as long as they keep the money flowing for their master. In this scenario, the slaves' status, wealth, and well-being are inextricably tied to the master's. The more money they make for him, the better and more comfortable their own lives become.

So let's look at the story again. A member of the wealthy gives three of his most trusted workers a jackpot to play with. They know the rules — the more they make for the boss, the more they'll get to keep for themselves. The name of the game is exploitation — no questions asked — and the only rule is: turn a profit. Turn as huge a profit as possible.

Two of the slaves do exactly as they're told. They take their talents out into the world and double them on the backs of the poor. Who knows how many fields they seize, how many farmers they impoverish, how many families they destroy? It doesn't matter: they fulfill the bottom line. They make a profit. When the master returns and sees what they've accomplished on his behalf, he's thrilled. He invites the two enterprising slaves to enter into his "joy" — the joy of further wealth, further profit, further exploitation.

But the third slave? The third slave in the story opts out. He decides that his master's character is greedy and corrupt, and that he no longer wants to participate in a dishonest system of gain, a system based on oppression and injustice. Knowing full well what it will cost him, the slave buries the heavy talent in the earth. He hides it, literally taking it out of circulation, putting it where it will do no further harm to the poor.

Is it any surprise that the master abuses and banishes the third slave when he returns from his journey? The slave is more than a quiet hero; he is a whistle-blower. At great cost to himself, he names the exploitation — the same exploitation he colluded in and benefited from for years. He relinquishes his claim on wealth and comfort, calls out the master's greed and rapacity ("I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed"), and accepts the ostracism and poverty that must follow from his choice.

Maybe this isn't a parable about the coming kingdom of God. Maybe this is a parable about the world we occupy right now. A parable about what faithfulness looks like in hard, hidden places. A parable about our complicity, and the high stakes involved in ending it. A parable about speaking truth to power. A parable about opting out of systems of oppression and exploitation — even and especially when we are accustomed to benefiting from such systems. A parable about interrupting "business as usual" for the sake of justice and

mercy. A parable about turning reality upside down in the name of love. A parable about saying, "Enough is enough," when it comes to the abuse and marginalization of the world's most vulnerable people. A parable about the rejection, impoverishment, and loneliness we might suffer if we take seriously the call of God.

Does the work sound too difficult? Too risky? Does this interpretation of the parable "do" too much — provoke too much? Prod too hard? Maybe. But consider this: Jesus asks nothing of us that he has not done himself. Just days after telling this parable, he was "cast into the outer darkness" of crucifixion, torment, and death. Like the third slave, he was deemed "worthless" and expendable by the people who wielded power and influence in his day. Like the third slave's costly talent, he was buried in a rock-hewn tomb.

Apparently, there is a good kind of "worthless" in the economy of God. May we find the courage to embody it.

Acknowledgement: Debie Thomas