



Here's One Way to Look at It
November 15, 2020: The Second Sunday of Advent
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Oh Lord: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight oh Lord, our Rock and our redeemer.

Some of you may know the great jazz singer Billie Holiday. I'm no expert on her song catalogue. But one of the songs that I do know, and has stuck with me through the years, is "God Bless the Child." The opening lines are these: "Them that's got shall get; them that don't, shall lose—so the Bible says, and it still is news. Your mama may have; your papa may have, but God bless the child that has his own."

The song comes from the late 1930s, in the Depression. The story goes that the song grew out of a spat she had with her mother, whom she had asked for a small loan, and who had refused. The passage referenced is our passage from the Gospel this morning. As we shall see, one way to understand this parable is as an exhortation to make the most of what God has given you. But as Holiday casts it, it can also be grasped as a parable about survival in an unjust world. More on that later.

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The parable forms part of an arc in the last of five sections of teaching, or discourse, attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Recall that for Matthew, Jesus is the new Moses, and the five sections of teaching are meant to recall the five books of Moses, the Torah. This gives authority to Jesus' teaching for Jewish Christians, and gives a foundation for Gentile Christians, who needed the instruction about the origins of their faith.

Jesus' final discourse is sometimes called the Sermon on Eschatology, or, from the Greek roots, "words about last things." It unfolds during the last week of Jesus' life, in Jerusalem. He is headed towards his death. The parables and stories he tells in chapters 23, 24, 25 emphasize themes like waiting, coming again, last judgement, and the kingdom of heaven, all appropriate Advent themes. Last week it was the parable of the waiting bridesmaids; this week it is the parable of the talents; next week it is the last judgement, wherein the sheep are separated from the goats.

If last week's parable wasn't hard enough... this week's may seem even harder. Again, Jesus asks us to wrestle with the words, by the power of our prayerful intellect and the Holy Spirit. As he tells the story on the side of Mt. Olivet, a walk of nearly two miles across the Kidron Valley east of Jerusalem, surrounded by his disciples, Jesus is asking us, too, to hear another vivid story set in first century life, to tease out the meanings, and with active thought, apply them to our lives.

An obviously wealthy man prepares to go on a long journey. He summons his slaves (likely educated, bureaucratic figures who handled all sorts of business for the master) and gives them an obscene amount of money. We've talked about this before—a talent was a measure of gold and was something like 15 or 20 years of wages for a typical worker.

The text tells us that he gave to each according to his ability but is silent on whether or not the man gave his slaves instructions. He simply entrusts the three slaves with an extraordinary amount of money, each

according to his ability, and leaves. The text then tells us that after a long time, the man returns. He finds that the first slave, according to his ability, has doubled his money; and likewise, the second slave, according to his ability, has doubled his money.

It makes one wonder if there was a first century Bernie Madoff hiding somewhere offstage in this story that might explain the suspiciously consistent 100% rate of return on investment.

Welcome to the joy of your master, the man says.

The third slave, playing it safe, digs a hole and buries the treasure. He knows it will be safe there. He doesn't want to anger his master by potentially losing such an extravagant sum. He wants to protect it. It's worth noting that according to first century Palestinian social ethics, the last slave did the honorable thing. The world that Jesus inhabited was a zero-sum world. All goods were in limited supply and were already distributed. This included not only material goods like money and property, but also honor, friendship, security, power, and status—literally everything in life. (Malina and Rohrbaugh, p. 48) There was no such thing as growing the pie. If one piece of the pie got large, other pieces necessarily got smaller.

So how is it that the third slave gets thrown into the outer darkness? Why is it that he seems to be punished for doing the right and honorable thing? Here could be the dynamite that usually lives at the heart of a parable.

While we carefully manage our temptation to allegorize parables—that is where every character or element stands for something outside of the story—it may not be unreasonable, for part of our wrestling, to imagine the man who gives out talents and goes away and comes back, as God.

Perhaps Jesus is blowing up the idea of a zero-sum game. That while it is fantastically unlikely to receive actual money in these amounts, and just as unlikely to double it, even over a long time, that of the things that really matter—courage, integrity, mercy, forgiveness, friendship, and especially, love—God is an extravagant giver. (And here is where we may convert the meaning of the word “talent” meaning a pile of gold worth fifteen years of wages, into the talent that means any sort of gift or skill with which God has blessed us, no matter what we may think of its size or importance.)

It is clear that the third slave is acting out of fear—he says as much. Could it be true that because he acts out of fear, the very thing that he fears comes to pass? And isn't it true that all of us are given a precious gift—life—and as well as other gifts which we may undervalue? And if we choose to bury it beneath rocks of fear and anxiety, we consign ourselves to a hell of our own construction?

And could it be true that the third slave is projecting onto the man a not uncommon understanding of God as harsh, demanding, unforgiving?



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And if that's the God we expect and look for, that is likely the God we will find? As CS Lewis used to say, the door into hell is locked from the inside.

I think our little exercise just now is a helpful way for wealthy and secure people like us in the affluent West to read this parable, though we have to be careful not to make God the bad guy. A good and generous God has given us gifts. We enter into the joy of the master when we live with passion and conviction, risking ourselves in service of others and God.

But most of us don't really have to worry about money the way a first century peasant had to worry about it. We're not likely to hear this story as if we are someone living on the far margins of our world. We're not likely to hear it as a parable that directly addresses making our way in a harsh world. To go back to the Billie Holiday song, her spin is that this Bible passage is a commentary on the truth of survival in a brutal, unfair world. Or as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "How you hear a parable has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from."

I wonder what we hear if we really put ourselves at Jesus' feet, sitting on a dusty hillside, beside the fisherfolk who depend on the sea, peasants who depend on the land, who are familiar with the exploitative practices of the rich.....

Next week, we'll try to listen differently.

Amen.