



Here's Another Way to Look at It
November 22, 2020: The Third Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Nicholas M. Morris-Kliment
Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA

Oh Lord: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Last week we heard the Parable of the Talents as our Gospel lesson. You recall the story: A wealthy man prepares to leave on a journey. He gives three of his household slaves absurdly large sums of money before his departure, each according to his ability. Upon the master's return, after a long absence, the first slave reports that he has doubled the master's money; likewise, the second slave. The Master presents each of these slaves with a ringing reward: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."

But the third slave reports that he has buried his portion, in order to keep it safe, and returns that amount to the master, with the aside that he knew his master was harsh, and he didn't want to lose his money. The master, true to his reputation, kicks the third slave into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. He declares that those who have shall get more; and even those who have little, will have it taken away.

I suggested that one way interpret this parable is to understand it as a story about God's lavish gifts to each of us. 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 and our gifts in service of others and God. If we live in fear, we will suffer in a hell of our own making. If we believe in a harsh and unforgiving God, that is the God we will find.

I also suggested that this was a comfortable interpretation for affluent Westerners who do not really know the deep economic insecurity of the landless peasants, fisherfolk and other marginalized people who made up the core of Jesus' followers, at least as the Gospels record things. As Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "How you hear a parable has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from." And I suggested that next week, we would have the opportunity to hear it from a different location.

Here we are, this week: If we inhabit the body of a landless peasant at Jesus' feet, we might see and understand the story differently.

For that third slave, this story represents how things really are. Beneath the surface harshness, the story *doesn't* describe a good and generous God. It describes how rich people really act. They make huge profits off the backs of poor people. That kind of return on investment meant that someone, likely someone like him, was taking a beating. How did the elite amass that kind of wealth? Scholar William Herzog writes this: elites lent money to the farming poor at breath-takingly high rates, and then systematically stripped those debtors of their land. Often the peasants who took such loans — at rates as high even as 200% — did so as an absolute last resort, putting up their parcels of land as collateral in last-ditch efforts to save their livelihoods. Inevitably, their efforts would fail. Drought would come, or a borrower would fall sick, or a crop would yield too little. At that point, the staggering interest rates a farmer agreed to would kick in and trigger foreclosure, and the poor man would have no choice but to



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surrender his ancestral fields, watch as the wealthy elite repurposed his fields for profit, and join the multitudes of landless day laborers who couldn't know from day to day where their next meal would come from.

(William Herzog *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, in Debbie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2814-the-good-kind-of-worthless>, accessed 2020.11.21)

The two “successful slaves” from last week’s Gospel are colluding in that exploitative system. The third peasant, however, refuses to participate in this system anymore. He is a kind of whistleblower; and he pays the price.

It’s a fine point, but an important one, to notice that in the Gospel story as Jesus tells it, these harsh words are in the mouth of the master.

It’s the master who is telling it like it is; it’s how rich people have set up the system. It’s not Jesus offering the condemnation and interpretation; it’s the master stating as fact the world that he and others like him have made. And that is the world to which the peasant says no. He will throw himself into the cogs of exploitation to slow them down.

In contrast, the world that Jesus points to—and calls us to work to for, and for which he himself would be thrown outside into the outer darkness and broken on a cross—comes in today’s Gospel.

It is a picture of the so-called Last Judgment, the last of Jesus’ parables that point to the longing, hoping, yearning, aspects of Advent. In his last days, Jesus tells the story of the last days of humankind. The Son of Man, that is Jesus, the humble King, comes in Glory and separates the sheep from the goats. The unsuspecting righteous on the right heading to the eternal life; the unsuspecting damned on the left, heading to everlasting fire.

For us, and for these first listeners, those like the third slave who refused to play the elitist game of exploitation, what is it that we are waiting for? What are we willing to sacrifice for? What is the world that we, as followers of Jesus, are invited to bring into being?

Here’s the vision of God’s reign! Here’s the purpose of humanity! Here’s the point of our life together on earth:

A world in which the stranger is welcomed, the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed; a world in which the thirsty have enough to drink, the sick are healed, the captives are freed; a world in which all whom we meet are treated as Christ himself. This is the reign of God that Jesus came, and comes, and will come again, to consummate.



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This past Friday I saw a profoundly moving webinar featuring Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop, in conversation with Russell Moore, head of the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, moderated by Krista Tippet. Sponsored by our National Cathedral and the National Institute for Civil Discourse, the topic was Faith, Compassion, and Healing our National Divides.

Bishop Curry noted that in the work of healing our divides, Christians must learn to both stand and kneel at the same time before other human beings. Kneel, because each and every human being we meet is created in the divine image, and this is cause for humility; stand, because each of us is created in the divine image, and we are to stand for our convictions and principles. That's the posture each of us needs to assume as we participate in co-creating the reign of God that is straining to come into being.

This Gospel passage practically feeds us the issues of our day, as we hold it up beside our individual and common lives in a time of COVID and political, social, and economic unrest: access to health care; care for the weak; welcome for the unhoused and the immigrant; reform of criminal justice; the danger of food insecurity; the calamity of environmental degradation.

It's probably more accurate to say that the passage reads us—as individuals and as participants in systems. And we wonder, how are we doing? When are the times that *I* have turned away, and am still turning away? Where are the places that *we* have turned away, and are still turning away? Where are we creating with God places of eternal life? Where are we creating on our own the hells, places of eternal punishment, in which we and others are already living?

It is so unbelievably hard. The need is overwhelming. It is easy to feel discouraged. We can feel paralyzed or helpless or inadequate, all at the same time. We stop and we start. It may feel like we are flailing. For example, I think of all the times that I have approached the spaghetti intersection at the Alewife T stop, or the space in front of the steps of our Cathedral, and have to choose, again, and again, whether I will engage the face of Christ in the one who is right in front of me. Or the times I have struggled with my mask—do I really need to wear this? How many appeals to my check book can I answer?

And yet. And yet. Even in a time of pandemic and political unrest, of deep fatigue in so many areas of our lives, we have cause to be so very grateful and to share.

We have a God who has given us the Church, the Body of Christ, to build us up into people of love and justice, not just for ourselves but for all people.

We have a Savior, Brother and Friend who promises never to leave us, who models the kind of humble kingship that leads to life for all. We have the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth. We have one another.



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And we give thanks for the bounty out of which we support the mission and ministry in this place. We will ask God's blessing on symbols of that financial commitment in a moment. Out of our bounty we also support in time and treasure our MANNA Monday Lunch, B-Love grocery bags for B-Safe; Circle of Hope; our partner Parish of St. Luc's Lazile, Haiti; in this Advent season we have the opportunity to bring joy to the vulnerable women and families on our Giving Tree. Our Diocesan assessment supports ministries throughout Eastern Massachusetts which feed the hungry, clothe the naked, help slow climate change through low-cost financing of solar panels, educate poor and underserved children, promote affordable housing, nurture the faith of young adults in area colleges, seek racial justice for all God's children, and much, much more – all ways that we are participating in the reign of God that Jesus inaugurates, all ways that we commit our very selves to the cause of Christ and the building of God's reign.

As we gather for the most unusual Thanksgiving in our lifetime, whether we're Zooming or Facetiming or Skyping with family and friends, whether we're having turkey or ham or macaroni and cheese, we can give thanks for the privilege of participating in the reign of God and ask for help to do so more and more. **Amen.**