Matthew 25:14-30
Parable of the Talents
Year A Proper 28 – 25th Sunday after Pentecost

Parables as Subversive Speech: Who is the Hero of the 'Parable of the Talents'?

I grew up, at times, relatively poor, in a post-manufacturing town in southeastern Michigan. My parents divorced when I was ten, and my mother, without even a high school diploma, and battling medical and psychological health concerns, struggled to find meaningful work. While I knew we had a safety net in my extended family, there was little money, and we received at times welfare assistance. I remember many concerns about debt for furniture, loans, and credit cards, what seemed like an endless and inescapable cycle. Being the recipient of food stamps—or "Aid for Dependent Children" as it was called in Michigan--was for me the source of real shame, and I remember scrutiny over what we were purchasing at the grocery store more than once. Escape from this situation happened for me through admission to a great public university, through scholarships, financial aid, and loans, and some hard work and luck. Desire for financial security has been an important driver in my adult life.

We're almost at the end of the liturgical year, the alternative calendar that many churches follow where the first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new year. This also marks our end in our yearlong adventure in Matthew's gospel, with its 20 parables. Parables such as the Wise and Foolish Builders, the Mustard Seed, the Unmerciful Servant, the Workers in the Vineyard, the Wedding Banquet, the Ten Virgins and their lamps and oil that Lisa preached on last week. And this week the Parable of the Talents, with the three servants, their master, and vast sums of money. All these lessons from Jesus are parables, or in Hebrew *mashal* which can also be translated as a "taunt" or "riddle". They are stories with unexpected twists in the plot and unexpected meaning that are meant to inspire in us a *metanoia*, to literally "change our minds", and think again, to think differently. To repent.

As you know I've been leading our work on our Church Profile (the Parish Council is reviewing what I hope is our final version now). And I've been reflecting on how we have different ways we engage with our faith, and different places and ways we find God. When I encounter Scripture, it is often important to me to engage deeply with the text itself: what is the context in which it was written, what are the purposes and agendas of the writers, what were their sources, how do they influence the narrative, what might they have added. This historical/critical approach in influenced by my academic training, but also from my inherent distrust in implied authority, particularly for Biblical texts, which for me as a gay man were, and continue to be used as an instrument of political and religious oppression. This kind of engagement with Scripture is one way for me that I can glimpse the face of Jesus and find the Good News. I do take the Bible seriously, but I do not take it literally.

The context of Matthew's gospel is important. As Lisa shared last week, it was written about in about the year 90 CE, twenty years after the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman army after the Great Jewish Revolt, and 25 years after the execution of Paul in Rome. The early

Christian church was starting to develop apart from Judaism with the inclusion of Gentiles as members who were not born Jewish. Persecution of this new sect was increasing under the Romans, and there was great social upheaval as the result of the massive displacements after the massacre and exile of much of the Jewish population.

Matthew's gospel has concerns which are particular to his gospel and in contrast to Mark and Luke, which all tell many similar stories and are likely derived from a common set of sources. The first is "what is the 'true' identity and belief of this new Jewish-Christian community apart from Judaism" and the second is, given the destruction of the Temple and the shattering of the Jewish people by the Romans (which would have felt like the end of the Jewish world), when will Christ return? When will the world truly end, so that Christ can things right?

The parable of the Talents follows what is Jesus' now-familiar pattern of telling a story set in a familiar context but with an unexpected twist. In this case, an aristocrat going on a trip gives enormous sums of money to three of his slaves or retainers (each according to his ability) and leaves. The amount of money here is truly stupendous: a talent equals about 3000 silver coins, or 10 years' wages for a common laborer. The first slaves receives 30,000 silver coins (100 years wages!), the second 12,000 (40 years!), and the third 6,000 (20 years!) – these are inconceivable sums to Jesus' audience, and is likely a form of rhetorical exaggeration. This both tells us we are in the topsy-turvy world of Jesus' parables where the "last shall be first" and our expectations are overturned, as well as perhaps highlighting the incredible disparities in wealth between rich and poor that are the daily reality to Jesus' peasant audience.

This parable is also found in the 19th chapter of Luke's gospel, and thus points to a common source text, which we do not have, that both Matthew and Luke likely drew upon. But Matthew's version adds his twist at the end about casting "this worthless slave into the outer darkness, with wailing and gnashing of teeth".

For how many of us was our instinctive reaction when hearing or reading this story that this is Jesus saying that the worthless slave should be cast into Hell? Show of hands? I think one piece of Good News here is that there is no casting anyone into Hell today. I don't believe that the God of Love Jesus calls Father would send anyone to Hell. I wonder if this "outer darkness" tag at the end of Matthew's version is more about the Matthew writer's hope for the end of the world. That said, it is an important detail of the story, and what I think what this parable is saying is actually quite surprising.

How do you read and hear a parable? Question (show of hands): how many of us think that God is the rich man in the story? Is God even a character in the story?

For many of us, our first instinct is to read Jesus' parables like allegories or fables, where each character or thing in the story represents something else. If we were to read today's Gospel as an allegory, we might assign the role of the rich man to God, ourselves to the role of the slave who made the most profit, someone we dislike the slave who made the least. If we were to treat this like a fable, which tend to have very simplistic moral statements (think "The Tortoise

and the Hare" or "The Boy Who Cried Wolf"), we might say "this story means that we are supposed to invest what God has given us" and perhaps feel very satisfied with ourselves.

J.R.R. Tolkien famously said that he "cordially disliked allegory in all of its forms", and I tend to agree with him. Allegories require little of our imagination, and if we approach the Bible in this way, we can easily to find a God who looks and acts a lot like us, likes what and whom we like, and dislikes what and whom we dislike. Being a follower of Jesus of course demands much more.

Another way to read a parable is to put ourselves in the place of each of the characters. When are we like the rich man, who entrusts our abundance with others? When are we like the slaves in this story, the ones who generate much profit? When are we like the one who was afraid, but is brave enough to speak up to the rich man, despite the consequences?

In doing research for today I came across a great book titled "Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed" by William R. Herzog. It is available for free online, and the author's way of getting at the heart of Jesus' parables is quite powerful and transformative for me.

Back to parables. What are they? Why did Jesus teach in this way, never quite saying something directly? Sometimes I think we tend "over-spiritualize" Jesus. What I mean by this is that it can be easy to think of Jesus as a sage, a "teacher of heavenly truths". But if Jesus was merely this, why was he a threat? What did he do that resulted in being labeled a political subversive, and to be crucified--which was the form of capital punishment reserved for those who were seen to be threat to the government--between two bandits? Could he have been a threat to the political and economic interests of both the Jerusalem elite and their Roman overlords? How?

Remember that Jesus' audience are mostly poor people, peasants. The social context of the time was ripe with expectations of a messiah and a revolt against the Roman occupiers. When John the Baptizer begins his ministry, he is confronting the same expectations. When people asked John and later Jesus if the time is now for the Kingdom of Heaven to appear, they were expecting a Messiah to come in power and overthrow the oppressors. John said "I'm not the one, but he is among you", and whenever Jesus revealed himself to his followers, he immediately told them to "not tell anyone about him". Being labeled any kind of messianic figure in 1st century Palestine was inherently very dangerous. So, perhaps Jesus must be careful, and parables are a powerful way to teach and transform minds without going "on the record" as it were.

Yes Jesus' audience is poor, more so they are impoverished--that is, "made poor"--as they are living in a system of land ownership, taxes, tributes, rents, loans, interest, and debt-slavery that would have been impossible to escape. And Jesus spoke directly to these concerns: it is no accident that 16 of Jesus' 38 recorded parables discuss money and possessions, and around 10% of the verses Gospels as a whole deal with this theme.

Another show of hands (there are no wrong answers): Who is the hero of the story? Is it the slave who made the biggest profit? The middle slave? The one who buried it and was punished? The aristocrat who went on a journey? Why do you think so?

What would it have meant to "invest" these enormous sums of money, as the aristocrat asked his slave-retainers to do while he was away? In the economic context of 1st century Palestine, one way would have been to lend it to other peasants, typically at very high interest rates (60-200%!), so they could plant their crops, with the peasant's land as collateral. If the peasant did not repay in full (difficult to do at such high interest rates), then the land was forfeit. Investing the aristocrat's money means exploitation.

The aristocrat's sheer wealth here is astounding, and his attitude is amazing when he says he has "entrusted [them] with a few things" as if 50 years' wages were nothing! The first two slaves are rewarded for fulfilling this trust (that is, exploiting their fellows), by being invited more deeply into their master's trust, and they might themselves partake in so-called "honest graft", even further exploiting their fellows in the service of their master. This is a deeply unjust situation but described by the master in such very polite language.

So, what about the third servant? First of all, he acts prudently: he buries the money, ensuring it won't be lost or stolen. But more importantly, he takes it out of circulation. By not "investing" it as his fellows have, he breaks the cycle of economic exploitation, and does no harm with it. While this would be significant enough, he goes a step further, and astonishingly he confronts the master, exposing the ugly truth of the whole situation: "You are a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter. I was afraid and hid your money in the ground." He is speaking truth to power here, effectively acting through non-violent resistance, calling out the aristocrat as an exploiter of others (something that would have been immediately familiar to Jesus' hearers) and is shaming him through his rebuke.

Wrapped in an innocent parable we suddenly see a very clear picture of, and challenge to, the everyday experience of a peasant farmer in 1st century Palestine. Was this why Jesus was so dangerous?

The third servant is, in effect, a "whistle-blower", describing the aristocrat for who he really is. But there is a price to be paid, and it is immediate (which it must be to discredit the third servant's words). He is immediately cast out of the household into the dark and cold. Losing one's station in this way would have put the third servant in the position of a day laborer, and because he had been an oppressor in the aristocrat's household, he would receive little sympathy from the peasants and poor. Likely homeless and with few prospects to support himself, his future would have been grim.

This story doesn't have a happy ending, clearly, despite the heroic actions of the third servant. Not all of Jesus' teachings do. But maybe it is intended to invite the hearer to ask hard questions.

The third servant acted alone and had no support from the other two for his actions. What would have happened if the other two had acted similarly? What if the retainers identified with the peasants instead of the aristocracy? What if they all refused to perpetuate the cycle of exploitation, even as the cycle uses and exploits them?

How does collective action further the Kingdom of heaven? And even if there is a price to be paid for speaking truth to power, do we have the courage? And there are many more questions this raises.

Yes, Jesus was a great spiritual teacher. And Jesus is the Christ, our risen Lord, as the Gospel of John says, "through whom all things were made". Jesus was also a canny commenter and unmasker of the painful and real social and economic truths of his time, truths that remain very relevant today. What if the Kingdom of Heaven is about human flourishing, not in some distant future, but right now?

What are the cycles of debt and poverty that exist in our economic system today? How are we impoverished by them, and how are we perpetuating them? And what can we do ourselves to unmask them? What can we do to change them? As we see the renewing strength of workers' rights and collective bargaining right now, how can we act collectively to make manifest the Kingdom of Heaven? And how could blue- and white-collar workers come to identify more with the poor and less with billionaires grifters and political con artists?

And for all these things, do we have the strength and courage?

I pray that, through the Risen Christ, and through Jesus' example and teaching, we find both.