

The Grace of Not Knowing—Matthew 25: 14-30
(November 15, 2020-24th Sunday after Pentecost)

When I sit down to write a reflection part of my process is to go back and read what I've written previously. They're little time capsules these old sermons. Reading them I'm reminded of what was going on in the world or the church at that time. I'm reminded of where I was at in my own life's journey and my understanding of faith. Three years ago when I preached on this scripture I said the core message is that we are stewards of the gifts God has given us and are called to serve God with them by not living in fear, but allowing God to work through those gifts such that we take faithful risks and live in a way that multiplies God's love in the world. I acknowledged some of the problematic aspects of the parable, for example, the master's harsh treatment of the third slave and Matthew's emphasis on God's judgement for unfaithful living. But, I was able to put all this aside to focus on what I thought of as the core message.

Well, not this time. My approach to the parable of the talents this week reminds me of the time a few years ago when my daughter got food poisoning as a result of some bad fish she ate during a fish fry at a friend's house. Since that time the smell of fish frying revolts her, she can't touch the stuff. Since I last preached on this parable much has happened that has poisoned it for me, that revolts me as I approach it.

I'm having a hard time glossing over slavery as merely part of the background of the story. When I see slavery in the story now I'm reminded of the ugly realities and pain of systemic racism which have been exposed to such an extent that these realities are now new lenses through which I view the world. I'm having a hard time glossing over the coercive economic relationships between the master and the three slaves. COVID has laid bare the economic inequality and exploitation in our society. The well off among us have choices and options to work from home and school from home whereas the poor among us (who tend to also be disproportionately racialized people) have no choice but to be put at risk of contracting the virus. The data has borne this out. I'm having a hard time glossing over the economic inequality of slaves enriching the master while remaining slaves. Again COVID has shone a spotlight on what had been happening for years, the concentration of wealth in a few hands while the vast majority struggle with precarious work. Jeff Bezo's Amazon and Galen Weston's Loblaws have amassed record profits yet pulled back a two dollar per hour increase for their workers. I'm having a much harder time glossing over Matthew's conception of a God who shows little mercy. This in light of the past four years where toxic religion among U.S. evangelical Christians has led to the elevation of a racist, narcissistic, authoritarian to the office of President.

I just can't stomach the lesson of this parable like I once did, too much has happened to poison it for me. I am all with the U.S. preacher Barbara Brown Taylor when she asks.

“We are seriously supposed to believe that the first two servants in this parable are the praiseworthy ones, both in this world and the next—for making a wealthy man wealthier, for keeping an absentee landlord in business, for scoring a 100% rate of return for him in exchange for their own pieces of the pie—these are the guys who are doing it right, while the third one— the only one who buries the talent where it cannot do any more harm, the

only one who tells the truth about the master (not behind his back but to his face), the only one who refuses to play the game any longer even if it means being banished from his master's expensive "joy"—he is the one whose "overcaution" and "cowardice" have cost him "the opportunity for meaningful existence"?!¹

In fact, as I read over the reflection from three years ago what I see revealed to me is my privilege, the privilege of a middle class white male who can gloss over things, who can intellectually explain away things that don't impact him. For that revelation at least I am grateful.

Can you see the struggle I'm having? I did my research. One promising line of inquiry came from the scholar Professor Richard Rohrbaugh. He writes that the scenario of a master leaving his property in control of his slaves—was not uncommon. In the ancient world, greedy people who did not want to get accused of profiting at someone else's expense, which was considered shameful, would delegate their business to slaves. Rohrbaugh explains the ancients' reasoning: "Shameful, even greedy, behavior could be condoned in slaves because slaves had no honor nor any expectation of it."

Accordingly, in the Talents' parable, the master leaves his money with his slaves in the hope that they will exploit the system and increase his riches. The first two slaves do just this, but the third "honorably refrains from taking anything that belongs to the share of another."

This slave also does not invest his money at the bank, through which he would have earned interest. The master further reprimands the slave for not doing this, but Rohrbaugh points out: "[S]eeking interest from another Israelite was forbidden by the Torah (Deuteronomy 23:19–20), and, elsewhere in Luke, Jesus says that we should lend 'expecting nothing in return' (Luke 6:35)." Should then the actions of the third slave be condemned or lauded? According to Rohrbaugh, reading Matthew 25:14–30 with ancient eyes suggests that the third slave is the only one who behaved honorably in the Talents' parable.² If this is how Jesus/Matthew's audience understood the parable why was the third slave, the honourable one, treated so poorly by the master?

As Sunday approached I was stressing about what to tell you. Then it hit me that maybe I need to embrace the "unknowing". After all isn't that what anti-racism work has taught us privileged people, to be humble, to listen? Maybe I need to sit with the discomfort of this parable's ugliness. Maybe I need to sit with the discomfort of not knowing what to do with it. Maybe as Barbara Brown Taylor says in the video, when God is silent and I'm disillusioned maybe I need to lose an illusion about God and that's a good thing.³ I find comfort in Taylor's words because I've

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Parable of the Fearful Investor* Matthew 25:14-30 – Proper 28, Year A. A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 13, 2011, <https://chapel-archives.oit.duke.edu/documents/BBT-FearfulInvestor.pdf>

² Richard Rohrbaugh, *What Does the Parable of the Talents Mean? Looking at Matthew 25:14–30 With Ancient Eyes*, September/October 2016 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*. <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/what-does-the-parable-of-the-talents-mean/>

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, from the video *A Stance of Unknowing*, *The Work of the People*, <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/a-stance-of-unknowing>.

been there before on the path of faith, the necessary task of emptying myself of cherished illusions so that God can fill that space with something more life-giving, more faithful and true.

One of the interesting aspects of this parable in Matthew's Gospel is that it occurs in a section where the disciples ask Jesus about the end times (Matthew 24:3).⁴ What will happen just before God makes an appearance they ask? Maybe Rohrbaugh's analysis makes sense in this context. Just before God makes an appearance those who refuse to accept the exploitation of others, those who refuse to accept unjust relationships will be thrown into darkness and unknowing. Maybe that's lesson for today, sit with the discomfort of refusing to accept the injustices in this parable, sit with the discomfort of refusing to accept injustice anywhere, sit with the discomfort of not knowing, sit with the discomfort of God's absence in the messages and state of affairs you once took for granted but have now been exposed as illusions. Sit in faith, make space for God to reveal some new and life giving revelation or direction. May this bring us hope. May it be so.

⁴ Rohrbaugh