

The Grace of Not Knowing—Matthew 25: 14-30
(November 19, 2023-25th Sunday after Pentecost)

I'm going to give you a head's up, this reflection will frustrate you. It's highly likely you'll walk away from the service this morning asking yourself, "What did he mean by that?" "What am I supposed to take away from that?" But it's not my fault, it's Jesus. I wish he were clearer. American Lutheran Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber agrees,

"Parables aren't too helpful, are they? Here's what would be helpful: six steps to better discipleship. Or the three secrets of the kingdom of God, spelled out in an acrostic. If only Jesus' teachings were as simplistic as they are often portrayed. If only parables were neatly packaged moralisms. If only these stories were clearer, perhaps packaged as an easy-to-read policy manual or employee handbook—that sort of thing."¹

I mean, come on Jesus, what are we supposed to make of the story this morning? American Episcopalian Barbara Brown Taylor once preaches her frustrations on this scripture a few years ago,

"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"?!²

One promising line of inquiry comes from the scholar, Professor Richard Rohrbaugh. He writes that the scenario of a master leaving his property in control of his slaves—is not uncommon at the time. In the ancient world, greedy people who do not want to be accused of profiting at someone else's expense, which is considered shameful (the good ole days!), 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

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Don't dissect the parables*, *The Christian Century*, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2012-06/dont-dissect-parables>, June 11, 2012.

² 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>

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 is 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 behaves honorably in the Talents’ parable.³ If this is how Jesus/Matthew’s audience understands the parable why is the third slave, the honourable one, treated so poorly by the master?

These things, they bug me in a way they don’t some years back. This week I read a previous reflection of mine on this parable. I acknowledge some of the problematic aspects of the parable, but I’m able to put it all aside to focus on what I think is the core message, the most well-known message about being a good steward of what’s given to you and taking faithful risks. I guess I’m in a different place.

In reflecting on this parable Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to say, how you hear it has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from.⁴ When I see slavery in the story now, I’m reminded of the ugly realities and pain of systemic racism, realities exposed to such an extent that they are the 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 after COVID lays bare these relationships. The poor among us lack the choice of working from home and must put themselves at risk. I’m having a hard time glossing over the economic inequality of slaves enriching the master while remaining slaves. This week, a report is released revealing the top 1%, by income, of tax filers in 2021 see their income rise by 9.4% and the top 0.1% see incomes rise by 17.4%. The bottom 50% see their incomes drop by 7%.⁵ I’m having a much harder time glossing over Matthew’s conception of a God who shows little mercy. This in light of an Israeli government and Hamas leadership invoking religion to justify slaughter. In light of faith being used to push children dealing with gender identity questions into silence. In light of U.S. evangelical Christians pushing the United States toward fascism.

As I read over that reflection what I see revealed 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 directly. In seminary I have a Hebrew Scriptures professor who regarding the way our faith stories can expose us says, “what a surprise to think

³ 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/>

⁴ Brown Taylor.

⁵ Pete Evans, *This just in: The rich are getting richer*, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/statscan-incomes-report-1.7025113>, November 10, 2023.

we're reading scripture when scripture is actually reading us." It's a living thing this interaction with scripture. We should study and try to interpret the stories of our faith tradition but never forgetting they're also something we experience. If these sacred stories reveal God to us, reveal something of the presence of the Holy in our lives then the proper stance before scripture is first and foremost humility and surrender. If we're doing it right these stories aren't just something we figure out, they figure us out as well.⁶ Wil Willimon, the American Methodist, put it this way, Jesus didn't come offering information about God, Jesus came offering a relationship with God.⁷ Information is so much easier though, isn't it? Information is power it's said, information is control. There's a place for that in life. But an information approach to the life of faith is a dead end. An information approach to faith creates God experts, implementers, and defenders of truth. People who want to "love" 2slgbtq+ people out of existence, people who want to "protect" our children from certain books, people who create residential schools to "save" Indigenous souls.

An information approach to faith is about a God who once was, who handed something down to be implemented. A relationship approach to faith is about a God who is, who is still active, alive. If this is the case that faith is a relationship then faith asks us to make room for the other, right? Because I'm in a relationship with Andrea, my wife, I make room for her in my life. I listen to her, I take her needs into account, I watch shows and movies I otherwise wouldn't. In the life of faith, it means allowing the Holy One to take us to a place of unknowing, where our cherished illusions about God, about life are surrendered and space is created for God to take us deeper into life, to love people, to love creation in ways we never imagine possible.

Are you frustrated yet? Darn that Jesus! What does this faith story mean? I'm not sure. All I know is I'm not the same person who preaches a clear message about this parable a few years ago. For this I am grateful, this I count as grace. Amen.

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⁶ Bolz-Weber

⁷ Source unknown