

“Wailing and Gnashing and the One-Talent Guy” by John Morris



Twenty-fifth Sunday After Pentecost

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When I signed up to preach this Sunday, I had a sermon in mind that didn't connect directly with any of the readings. I was pretty sure I knew what I wanted to say, and so I didn't start to think about it until maybe a week ago. That was when I discovered that my original topic no longer interested me, and I didn't have anything worth saying about it.

Up to that point, I hadn't even read the lectionary. So when I did, I found the passage from Judges, concerning some ancient quarrels that I had no stake in; the passage from Thessalonians, whose author has the rather sweet

belief that drunks only get drunk at night; and . . . THE PARABLE OF THE TALENTS.

This is one of Jesus' teachings that I think of as The Scary Stories. However you want to interpret the main action of the story – and I'll talk about that in a minute – the ending is frightening. "Throw this bum into outer darkness! Let the wailing and the gnashing commence." I take this personally. I've walked down at least two wrong paths in my life, and I know what it feels like to stand at the end of such a path – a solid wall that says, "You can go no further; you must change your life" – and to be afraid. What if I don't? What if I can't? I never believed in a literal hell, but the terror that there might be some rough, implacable, karmic justice waiting for me has stayed with me to this day. The parable of the talents connects me with that awful, gut feeling of being judged and condemned.

Of course I tried hard to find anything else to preach about, prayed for some indication that God wanted me to use this pulpit in some less complicated way. But I kept being drawn back to the parable, and to the fact that I have never been able to understand it or accept it. I decided, therefore, to try once more, and if possible to use my efforts as the basis of a sermon.

Just to give you a little spoiler: I still don't have an interpretation of the parable that satisfies me, but at the conclusion of this sermon I'm going to suggest that this is OK, and that if you're going to take the Bible seriously, it had better be OK, since clear interpretations are often hard to come by. Confusion and discomfort about scripture is the beginning of your journey, not the end. And to invoke my other hero of antiquity, Socrates, this kind of confusion is actually very good for you, however uncomfortable

it may be. True wisdom begins with finding out what we don't know, and being willing to stay in that place of unknowing, and not fall back on easy, black-and-white answers.

OK, let's start with the standard interpretation of the story, the one we all pretty much know. The landowner is God, or Jesus, and the workers are us. The talents, to use the common translation, represent a very large sum of money, or, if you believe that by miraculous coincidence the Greek word *talanta* was meant to be understood as the English word "talent," then the talents are individual talents or gifts. Or possibly they represent the word of God, the gift of faith.

The landowner entrusts the talents, in various quantities, to three workers and goes off on a long journey. Many have interpreted this to mean the ascension of Jesus, so when the landowner finally returns, that would be the second coming, the end of the age. This is certainly consistent with the context of the parable in Matthew, where it's situated among a group of parables all describing what it will be like when the kingdom of God arrives. The first two workers have increased the owner's wealth (or their own faith and grace), and are applauded. But not the third worker. I think "guy" has become ungendered (as in "Can I get you guys anything?") so I will call this worker the one-talent guy; their pronouns will be "they" and "them". The guy says this:

"Knowing your ruthlessness—you who reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter—and fearing your wrath, I went off and buried your thousand dollars in the ground. Here is your money back."

The enraged owner repeats the unflattering characterization sarcastically back to the one-talent guy, and says, "All the more reason to deposit my money with the bankers, so that on my return I could have had it back with interest!" It ends badly for the one-talent guy, possibly with the implication that, at the end of the age, they'll be

cast into hell for this mistake.

The standard interpretation ignores the charge that the owner's gains are ill-gotten, and presents the parable as another of Jesus' stories about being prepared, about not squandering the gift of faith, of doing all that you can with what you've been entrusted.

I think Wikipedia strives for the most uncontroversial, consensus-based content, as a rule. Here is how Wikipedia tells the conclusion: "Upon returning home, after a long absence, the master asks his three servants for an account of the talents he entrusted to them. The first and the second servants explain that they each put their talents to work, and have doubled the value of the property with which they were entrusted; each servant is rewarded: The third servant, however, has merely hidden his talent, burying it in the ground, and is punished by his master."

The troublesome explanation of why the one-talent guy did what they did, is simply omitted.

There is another, more contemporary interpretation of the parable shared by a number of theologians. It's known as the liberation-theology interpretation. Here is Symon Hill, a Christian activist and theologian:

"Try reading this story to someone who is unfamiliar with it, without commenting, and ask them with which character they most identify. When I have done this, the response has been 'the third servant.' He seems to be treated appallingly harshly and yet he has the bravery to speak truth to power – 'you take what you did not deposit.' Why are we so keen to equate the rich man with God? What does it say about our theology if we assume that a rich and tyrannical figure must represent God?"

Hmm, that's food for thought all right. Another contemporary theologian, Jeremy Myers, puts it plainly:

“The hero of the story is the third servant, who did not become richer, but instead was content with what he was given. . . . The master gets mad at this third servant and tries to shame him by taking away (read ‘stealing’) his possessions and giving it to the one who is already rich. This . . . is shameful behavior on the part of the master.”

This is echoed by pastor David Shirey:

“But is this Master the God we know in Jesus Christ? A hard, thieving, ruthless, angry, vindictive bully? I mention this because if you live life afraid of God you’ll serve God out of fear to avoid punishment and live life with an ulcerous knot in your stomach fed by the nagging sense you’re not doing enough well enough enough of the time to earn God’s approval. Which is a terrible way to live life that’s born of a terrible way to think of God.”

In the face of such radically different interpretations, couldn’t we just say that it’s up to each of us how to understand the story? That Jesus, in telling this parable, didn’t have one single meaning in mind, but wanted his listeners to identify as they saw fit? Theologian Ian Paul has this to say about such a middle-ground position:

“These different approaches take us in quite opposite directions, and it makes little sense to think that Jesus’ teaching could be read in these two ways equally. If so, then Jesus’ teaching means nothing, and functions simply as a blank canvas on which we project our own pre-formed interest—which is hardly then either radical or challenging.”

Although I find this a little overstated, I’m in substantial agreement. There are certainly nuances of interpretation to be found in the stories of Jesus, and it’s sometimes unclear, as here, what he meant, but that he meant *something* is never in doubt. He was not being deliberately ambiguous. It always seems clear that he has a message he

intends to deliver; it's not up to his listeners to decide. And indeed, when he's asked at various points in the Gospels what his parables mean, he sometimes explains very precisely. Or sometimes he says, in effect, that the non-initiated may be puzzled but his disciples will understand.

So, is it possible to interpret the parable of the talents in a way that makes consistent sense of *all* the verses, not just some, and also places the story in a Gospel context?

In preparation for this sermon, I've now read 14 interpretations or commentaries, both classic and modern, of the story. Only one meets the requirements I just gave – inclusion of all the verses, and respect for the Gospel context. Interestingly, that one is the earliest I found, from 17th century theologian William Burkitt, an English Anglican. Burkitt doesn't hesitate to take on the troublesome accusations of the one-talent guy. Burkitt calls them a "prejudice against his master." He goes on: "The effect of that prejudice, he was afraid; and the fruit of his fear, he hid his talent in the earth. Learn hence, That sinners entertain in their minds very hard and unkind thoughts of God; they look upon him as a hard Master, rigorous in his commands, and difficult to be pleased. Learn, 2. That such hard thoughts of God do naturally occasion slavish fear, which is a great hindrance to the faithful discharge of our duty to God."

So at least we have an attempt to make sense of the entire story. Burkitt's interpretation is that the one-talent guy has the wrong idea about the landowner; it's a prejudice, a calumny. And we should understand this to mean that sinners also have the wrong idea about God. They think God is rigorous and hard to please, and this makes them fear God rather than have faith.

The only problem with this interpretation is, pretty obviously, that the God of this parable *is* rigorous and hard

to please – not to mention wrathful, unforgiving, and punishing. So how can the one-talent guy be portrayed as wrong about this? Burkitt takes all the verses into account, but doesn't seem to notice this contradiction.

Yesterday morning, Kate Lasso's Inward/Outward reflection also voices this idea. "For me," she writes, "this gospel reflection is a lesson on the consequences and disappointments of living a fear-based life." But like Burkitt, she doesn't take into account that the one-talent guy's fears prove absolutely realistic and justified. The one-talent guy is afraid that if they don't do the right thing, they'll be punished. And guess what? That's exactly what happens.

Now the liberation-theologians also use all the verses, but here the problem is context. This parable is the third in a series of consecutive stories in Matthew that, as I've already said, show Jesus describing what it will be like when the realm of God arrives. In none of the other stories is there even a suggestion that the master or landowner or bridegroom could be anyone other than God. Jesus introduces this parable by saying, "Again, it's like a wealthy landowner . . ." The word "again" clearly refers back to the stories he's just told. He's making the point one more time. That Jesus would suddenly turn around and tell a story in which the master is the villain, and the servant is unjustly thrown into outer darkness, is frankly incredible.

So what happens if I try to use my own experiences and emotions as a way into the parable? I already spoke about the terror that the conclusion of the story evokes in me. Going deeper, I remember my father – or really, what I remember is how a very small boy pictured his father – powerful, always right, the one whose orders must be obeyed and whose judgments must be feared. In reality, my father was a kind and gentle man, no more authoritarian than most fathers of that era, but little boys are not subtle thinkers. In the

parable, I'm the one-talent guy, trying to do the right thing but failing miserably. I can even catch a glimpse of my own anger and resentment, in those charges of injustice – "Pop, what gives you the right to tell me what to do? Are you really so perfect yourself?"

The first two servants are also familiar to me. After all, I *did* do a lot of things right, and got a lot of praise for it. "Well done!" "Cleverly done!" Music to my ears. And a more adult part of me can identify with the master's judgmental reaction to the one-talent guy. "You did what with my money? Buried it in the ground? No wonder I only gave you one talent, you idiot!"

OK, deep breath.

I'm not a Biblical scholar. My statement that I've read 14 interpretations of this parable is the same thing as saying: I spent a couple of hours on the internet. How arrogant would I have to be, to claim that I've learned all that can be learned about the subject. But this quest for interpretation, which you've been kind enough to give attention to this morning, seems to me typical of how we have to approach the Bible. If we don't believe that scripture is inerrant, the literal and infallible word of God – and I'm assuming most of us here take that position – then we aren't committed to finding truth in scripture in the same way we look for the truth of a scientific or mathematical passage.

Did Jesus intend to be pointing to something true in this parable? Probably. Are we sure what he meant? Probably not. But that is the beginning of the journey, not the end. The parable's themes couldn't be clearer – gifts, trust, obedience, injustice, fear – and it's up to us to find ourselves there, and let these themes speak to us. Sometimes they speak in different voices, and disturb us with their inconsistency. But as long as we respect the text and the context, I don't think we have to worry about truth with a

capital T. It's been said many times before, but I'll say it one more time, in conclusion: If Jesus had meant to teach that kind of truth, he would not have spoken in parables.