

Reflections on Matthew 25:14–30
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“As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” There it is again! The threat of hellfire and damnation that is too often the unfortunate reputation of the church and possibly triggering memories for some of us from our past, especially at this time in the church year. The punitive response of the master to the third slave is cruel and unusual. It does not convey the merciful love we expect from the Gospel of Jesus. So, what might be going on?

I usually hesitate to employ interpretations that seem to depend overly on cultural and linguistic background information. For if the Gospel seeks to be anything, I think, it is clear and accessible in its communication of the good news. In principle, we can hope and trust that the Spirit is able to reveal a word to everyone who reads scripture with an open heart. No prior experience or learning is necessary! But, maybe this parable is an exception. At the very least, we are invited to resist the urge to take the parable literally but to listen instead deeply with the ear of the heart.

Many scholars and commentators have tried to relieve the tension, to make some useful sense of what is truly a shocking ending. Each of these voices has some merit and can help us not so much undo or remove the needed edge of this parable, but seek a living and inspirational message within it. This time around, I've been especially drawn to the insight of James Alison who writes:

The problem of the servant who received one talent and went and buried it is not its lack of yield, but how he imaged that his master would treat him. ...One who imagines his master is free, audacious, generous, and so on, takes risks, and himself [sic] enters into a fruitfulness that is ever richer and more effervescently creative; while one whose imagination is bound by the supposed hardness of the master lives in function of that binding of the imagination, and remains tied, hand and foot, in a continuous, and may be even eternal, frustration.

In Alison's reading of the parable, then, what is being questioned is not so much what we are or are not doing with what God has given us, but *our view of God as the Giver*. Do we imagine God—and the nature of God's creation—to be primarily harsh and miserly, focused on self-interest and ruling in fear inducing ways? Or is our experience one of generosity, abundance, lavish self-giving and a confident hope that all things are working together to create harmony and balance?

I suspect all of us can locate ourselves somewhere on this continuum, most likely sliding one way or the other at any given time. How we view God and life, and thus respond to the world around us, has its origin in our childhood experiences.

For example, the more fearful image embodied by the third slave was reflected in my father's wish that my two older brothers and I would grow up and build homes on the family property. This may have been somewhat of a joke on my father's part, something to goad my oldest brother who pushed the boundaries of our small-town upbringing. But my dad's refrain was in keeping with some of his other views which, looking back now, can only be described as anxious and confining. Life was uncertain and scary, full of threat and bad will. Therefore, it's best to stay home and protect yourself as well as you can.

A contrasting voice came from my mother who herself was a German immigrant to the United States after the war. Though I would not call her especially adventurous, she did encourage me to spread my wings in many ways. A symbol of my mom's determination that my life be enlarged beyond the

anxious confines of my Midwest mob is the incredible sacrifice she made to send me to Catholic school and then a liberal arts University—away from home!



Together, these two voices create a spectrum on which I move. Sometimes I can feel overwhelmed by life's realities. I experience natural challenges and rebuffs as evidence that the master of the universe is harsh, reaping where he does not sow and gathering where he does not scatter seed. In this fearful, anxious space, it is tempting to pull back, play it safe, guard and protect what in time would shrink down to a very small, self-involved existence.

But at other times, I am confident in the Great Goodness that streams steadily into our world. Like switching the TV channel from Fox News to Gardening Australia, I am more aware of the limitless grace and beauty in our world, and therefore there is no reason to withhold or withdraw. I, we, can take risks and step forward with courage to love. Here, the words of David Steindl-Rast ring true:

To have faith does not primarily mean believing something, but rather believing *in someone*. Faith is trust. It takes courage to trust. The opposite of faith is not disbelief, but distrust, fear... faith is the courage to respond gratefully to every given situation, out of trust in the Giver.

The master in the parable is exceedingly generous and trusting, and in Alison's reading, this seems to be the point of the parable. A talent is a unit of measurement that in the parable equals more than fifteen years' wages. So, this was not a small amount of money entrusted to the slaves. What might the Gospel hope to convey to us about the nature of God? and what trust and gratitude might it encourage within us?

On Tuesday night, as we set up for compline prayer, I saw one of the regular attenders sitting on a bench in the courtyard and went outside to invite him back in. James was speaking with a first-time guest named Tagwey, a woman from Sudan who recently moved from Salisbury to Adelaide. James invited Tagwey to join us for prayer but she was hesitant. "I'm a different religion," she explained to which James responded, "It doesn't matter. It's a universal prayer... and you can pray in your own way."

Personally, I was grateful to know this has been James' experience and inspired to watch the gentle, welcoming interaction between them. Tagwey did decide to stay for prayer. Despite the fact that I had chosen "O the deep, deep love of Jesus" for the first song, it didn't seem to stand in the way of what appeared to be heartfelt participation on Tagwey's part—her presence a reminder to us of God's wide, inclusive love.

This is just one example of the ways we are entrusting ourselves as a church to a God who is inviting us to enter a "fruitfulness that is ever richer and more effervescently creative." Through openhearted attention to and grateful reception of what is before us, and a willing investment in the love that is possible in each moment, there we find Christ manifested in our midst.

As we continue to navigate the future on the continuum between fear and love, may we seek to be like the first and second slaves. May we be increasingly aware of the bounty that has been entrusted to us, conscious and grateful for the abundant grace and beauty poured into our world daily. Deeply connected to the Source, I pray we will take bold risks in our loving—not losing our nerve when love becomes demanding or unsettling or seems out of *our control*. And in stepping forth with trust, may we find ourselves entering the joy of the Giver now and in the fulness of time.