

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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November 15, 2020

Today's gospel picks up where we left off after last week's parable with the bridesmaids and the lamps. Today's parable is a bit more complicated, and it's difficult to interpret. But, Biblical scholars remind us that parables aren't direct and oftentimes, they don't prescribe. Parables are meant to *describe* some kind of reality, to *invite* us into the story, and to "do" something to us.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> So what does today's parable describe, invite, and do? Well, it depends on how you look at it.

One of the more traditional ways to look at this parable is to invite us to see humankind as the slaves and God as the master. In this interpretation, we see God abundantly giving talents and we are invited into God's abundance mindset. After all, talents were massive amounts of precious metals worth about \$1.5 million each.<sup>3</sup> The trust given to the slaves was immense! So, when the one slave does not use the talents to multiply the master's gift, then, it's seen as an unwillingness to participate in community and share what has been abundantly given. So, the third slave received what he

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2814-the-good-kind-of-worthless?fbclid=IwAR2piv3Djg0qIvTAjR12iH8YnZH3kt3aSmCDqBsIU7b4Obs2D5B9DLHFFZM>

<sup>2</sup> Stiller, Brian C. "Preaching Parables to Postmoderns." p. 9

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2020/11/pentecost-24-a-believing-and-seeing/>

believed. In other words, because he approached God's abundance with a scarcity mindset then he created a world filled with scarcity and terror.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, some scholars take issue with this understanding because the master seems so uncharacteristically God, and the economics seem to be at odds with God's vision. So, instead, these scholars look at this parable as one that is meant to sit in *contrast* to God's vision and nature. The parable was meant to show us how the world traditionally works so that we can better see how God acts differently than the world. And this argument roots itself in the historical context of Jesus' time.

You see, the three slaves were likely the masters middle-men who oversaw the land and the workers, collected the debts of the master, and kept the profits coming in for the master. These profits were made and amassed by the wealthy through exorbitant high-interest loans given to poor farmers living in desperation. These farmers would put up their land as collateral for a loan with a rate between 60 and 200% as a last-ditch effort to save their livelihood. However, at some point drought, illness, or poor yield would occur. Then, the interest would run amok followed by the surrender of the land to pay the loan. With the land, the wealthy master would repurpose the field for profit by utilizing the land-less day laborers to work on the fields.

With this being the world in which the slaves found themselves, then, theologian Debie Thomas thinks that maybe that third slave finally had enough of seizing fields, destroying families, and making profits for the elite.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4621](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4621)

Maybe he decides that the masters corrupt, greedy, and oppressive way of operating was unjust and wrong. Instead, that third slave put that talent where it could no longer do any harm, right there, deep in the ground.

In this interpretation, we are invited to be like the third slave. That is, to be the critic of the unjust status quo. We are invited to take our knowledge of God's vision and God's character to expose the world for what is, namely that it is at odds with God's abundant life.

And, perhaps neither of these ways of seeing the parable is correct. After all, they both speak the truth that convicts us in revealing that something is amiss in our world—whether that's because (a) we live in a scarcity mindset or (b) because of our complicity in a system of exploitation. Either way, those are hard truths that we live among each day.

We constantly believe there is not enough even when God has given us everything (literally, everything!), so we hoard essentials, we grab as much of our natural resources as we can, and we believe the lie that there is not enough to go around. So too, we exploit essential workers with low pay and high pandemic risks, and we participate in unjust systems that preserve the status quo, and we fail to stand up to the master of the system for fear of being called wicked.

But, using a Lutheran lens, *both* understandings have law *and* gospel—that is they both convict us and they both uplift us. This parable does not leave us abandoned and alone. Rather, this parable shows us God's grace, whether it's (a) God's abundance entrusted to us to share with all the world,

or (b) whether it's contrasting God's nature with the greedy master to remind us of God's vision. That is, a vision for the world that does not require those on the margins to suffer, a vision that does not inflict pain on others for our own gain, and a vision where the weak are lifted up, the poor are praised, and those who mourn are comforted.

You see, this parable invites you and me to step into its quarks and to use our intellect, our experience, and the Scriptures to catch glimpses of our God. And with these glimpses, we're invited to imagine what this world will look like when we fully experience God's abundance, justice, and peace. And, when we see those glimpses in the present, we are given the opportunity to partner with God to bring about this reality. For, during this season of Advent we wait for this, but we don't wait with a baseless hope, rather, we wait with sure and certain hope for God to come among us, to bring about God's full reign, to make all things new. For, our God, came among us in the form of a human, our God has fulfilled God's promises, and so too, God will most certainly fulfill God's promise once again to renew and restore all the earth with love, justice, and peace. Amen.