Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Ah, yes. The parable of the talents. A text that has been commonly interpreted as one about spiritual gifts. A text that for many generations has been taught to be about our duty to use said God-given gifts for the betterment of the world. You see, Christians have long looked at this gospel passage and noted how the first two slaves receive the exact same praise and reward. Even though one makes more than the other, the master tells them both the same thing: “well done, good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Christians have looked at this as evidence for the fact that our work is not ultimately about how much money you make, but about faithful service.

This past week, as I scoured Biblical commentaries and various pockets of the Internet, source after source, this idea is what I was finding. Reflections on living up to our full potential, on how our service in this lifetime is working to bring about the kingdom of God. And that is a good and fine message–sweet, even–but yet it also feels like that is a message that has now been turned on its head with the development of AI. You see, these various platforms I turned to this past week had nothing to say about the fact that we are now suddenly operating in a world–and rapidly plunging even further into that world–where we are no longer given the opportunity to use these so-called gifts in the same way the rest of humanity always has. We are living in a different world than we used to, and any sort of acknowledgement of

how artificial intelligence has altered our human experience as it relates to our labor was noticeably absent in my text study. In fact, the only time I even encountered the phrase “artificial intelligence” was when I opened Sundays and Seasons, Augsburg Fortress’s worship-planning resource, and they invited me to take part in a SurveyMonkey survey about how they might incorporate AI into their platform, to make planning a worship service and writing a sermon easier for us ministerial leaders. I digress.

Truthfully, I think maybe the reason why this is pulling at me so much right now is just because I feel like I have had many conversations with people recently about how AI is essentially taking away their purpose in life. Let me tell you a quick couple stories. Just the other week, a friend was sharing with me how he was up for a job promotion at work, and in the interview with his bosses they basically told him that this new role would be to supervise an AI agent. And that if he wanted this promotion–if he wanted a salary increase–he was going to have to agree to using AI a whole lot more, whether he liked it or not. Then, the very following night after that conversation, I was talking with someone else, this time a teacher. And this teacher shared with me, with what I noticed to actually maybe be small tears in his eyes, how none of his students come to him for help anymore. And that it didn’t used to be that way. He’s in the Economics department up at Northwestern, and he said kids used to come to his office hours and have study sessions for class with each other and now everything just goes through ChatGPT. I’m sure we’ve all had conversations like this recently, and to be clear both of these people–the teacher and the one up for a promotion–understand that the world is changing and evolving and that AI is an inevitable reality at this point, but

they were just sad about the ways it is taking away the things they love to do. The things that make their spirits come alive.

So that all leads me to the question of: what do we do with this teaching in front of us this morning? What do we do when our faith is telling us to use our gifts in this way, to be faithful workers, and yet we are waking up in a world where we cannot always do that very exact thing?

Well, what if there's another way to look at the parable?

Because as I did more digging this week, away from the suddenly AI-infested resources I have always used for my preaching, I came across an article in the magazine Sojourners that shared the perspective of a group of peasants in Nicaragua, who had a hard time connecting God with the master in this story. As people under the rule of rich, elite men who would violently suppress their dissent, these Nicaraguan peasants could not make sense of God being synonymous with a rich, elite man who violently suppresses dissent. Moreover, they did not like that the parable was about speculating with money, and ultimately they saw themselves in the so-called "wicked and lazy" slave. They could see how the master was being immoral, and how this slave in his bold act of defiance was actually refusing to exploit people.

Quite a different take from where we first began, no?

What's important to note is that, much like these people in Nicaragua, Jesus' followers–so the people who were first hearing this story–were also under the rule of rich, elite men who violently suppressed dissent. The situation of

exploitation laid out in this parable would be very familiar to Jesus' audience. The master is expecting his slaves to just turn around and exploit other people when he gives them his talents, so perhaps this whistleblower of a third slave exemplifies what Jesus' audience wishes they could say or do to a quote-unquote master if ever given the chance. When we take this step back and consider the historical context of this parable, we can imagine how Jesus' intention here might have actually been to expose exploitation and inspire courageous action, even when the consequences may be violent and extreme. Perhaps *this* is the most faithful service. Because after all, lest we forget, Jesus himself is someone whose ministry led to Roman soldiers executing him on a cross, a form of execution specifically intended to show people what happens when you defy Rome.

My friends, we are living in a violent and exploitative world right now, there is no denying that. The question before us, then, is what to do in that violent and exploitative world. What is our most faithful act of service right now?

Perhaps it is dissent. Perhaps that is the message Jesus has for us today.

And to be clear I'm not saying this is the capital-c Correct way to read this parable–the wonderful thing about parables is that they evolve with us and there are always going to be as many interpretations as there are interpreters–but we know, **we know** Jesus loves the outcasts and the poor. There has to be something in there for them. So, as we read this gospel passage today in the era of artificial intelligence, may we certainly hear of Jesus' encouragement of our freedom. We have the freedom to be the third

slave in the story. Acts of courage are also faithful, I hear Jesus saying to us, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise.

Before I wrap up, let me quote directly from the Sojourners article, which I should mention the theologian Damon Garcia wrote. He says, "Making a difference will threaten your security, but that's how exploitative systems disincentivize people from changing things. Change is made through people choosing to challenge the status quo even when there's no incentive to. In a society where capitalists have power and control over workers, we're expected to use our gifts to conform to who capitalists expect us to be. Acts of refusal and resistance are how we reclaim the parts of ourselves that have been suppressed."

Acts of refusal and resistance are how we reclaim the parts of ourselves that have been suppressed. That sentence makes me think back again to my friend up for a job promotion and the Economics professor at Northwestern and the many other hearts and stories that I know exist in this very room right now of parts of ourselves that have been suppressed. And with that I will not ignore the fact that we are being taken from the things we love, but I will not ignore the fact either that we still have agency. I will not ignore the fact that in some ways the world is unrecognizable from this very date 5 years ago, but I will not ignore the fact either that we are **not** resigned to a fate decided by a cohort of a few rich men. I will not ignore the fact that it is **not** too late, and that the gift God has given us of our *life together* is a force that can never be taken away, and that love will always, always prevail.

We are certainly caught in a precarious moment right now, but there is also liberation to be found. In this season of Advent, we remember how there is–and always will be–liberation found in the birth of Christ.

Amen.