SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, NOVEMBER 15, 2026
JUDGES 4:1-7; PSALM 123; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-11; MATTHEW 25:14-30

WHAT IN THE WORLD, JESUS?!

One of the benefits of church-in-the-round centered on Terra is that we each get a different perspective on the globe. Some get mostly Antarctica; if you're further out, you'll likely see just how large Africa is, disproving the Mercator projection that most of us were raised on. Many of us, from our points of view, will not be able to catch much of North America, but the choir in the gallery rides a different orbit up there.

Regardless of one's worldview, the rotation of Earth invites us to still consider how we share this island home with folks we will never meet, seemingly light years away, but not really. We are connected, and how we live matters.

This notion of worldview informs our approach to the parable in the gospel this morning—arguably one of the most complicated, difficult parables Jesus shared, and certainly ripe for misinterpretation. I will confess I don't know what Jesus meant for sure here, but I do know that Jesus taught in parabolic fashion as a way of turning things on their head, so that we might be cajoled from our seats of comfort and familiarity, and consider a different way of seeing things. And I do think there is good that can come from that.

First, a bit of historical perspective. A talent in Jesus' day was a rarely seen, rarely used benchmark for economic uber-wealth. Think gold bars in Fort Knox. A talent was worth about 6000 denarii, or twenty years of a

laborer's daily wage. So, the one given five talents was given a hundred years' worth of income, and told take care of it for your master. Millions of dollars in today's terms. The point is that Jesus is hyperbolic here, over the top.

Two slaves take risks to get a return on what they're given, and they double the investment. They are lauded for their efforts because presumably the master cares about results (well done), the methods used to make the return (he calls these two "good"), and he applauds their motivation (they are trustworthy).

But the third one hides his one talent in the ground. When his master returns, the fretful scene ensues. He's thrown into the outer darkness. If this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven, as Matthew says it is, then we can presume this outer darkness is a hellish existence for the third slave. No heavenly pillows of cloudy comfort for you!

So, what are we to make of all this?

Some scholars with a liberation theology bent maintain that this is actually Jesus' critique on the empire. Greed is good in that worldview, and the master is actually the proverbial gluttonous landlord that is never satisfied with the wealth he has. And every relationship is transactional. Remember, Jesus' parables are meant to turn the thing on its head so we can see a different perspective.

That's one way to angle into this parable.

Another related point of entry into this parable would be specifically Black liberation theology. Billie Holiday's song *God Bless The Child*, released in the late 1930s, at the depths of the Great Depression, became something of a folk hymn among southern Black sharecroppers eking out an existence under Jim Crow oppression. They knew what it was to be treated unfairly and to know what little they had could be taken away on a wealthy person's whim.

Drawing on the unsettling verse 29 in today's gospel: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away," Billie Holiday and her composing partner Arthur Herzog, Jr., wrote these haunting lyrics:

Them that's got shall have
Them that's not shall lose
So the Bible said and it still is news
Mama may have, Papa may have
But God bless the child that's got his own,
that's got his own.

It is a historical reality played out even today: people who already have money, status, or

possessions receive support more easily. They make more money more easily. Those who have little and need help are more often ignored, left to fend for themselves. The Bible said this, "*and it still is news.*" Was Jesus speaking into this orbit of injustice? It's worth considering…

If we turn the thing on its head again, we might orient to the double entendre found in the meaning of the ancient word "talent." Yes, it was a measure of massive wealth in the Roman Empire, but if we just follow the parable along its literal edge, dealing with money only, we will have missed the point.

A more traditional interpretation of the parable is that God is the master who shares abundantly the talents we've been given in life. So abundantly, in fact, that we could say it is profligate, over the top, and it is our responsibility to use the talents we've been given—the gifts we have in life—to do the work of the kingdom of heaven here and now, before Christ returns again. Time, talent and treasure. The parable is about faithfulness, using our resources rightly and for good. Not just money, but all that we have and all that we are. What does that look like for you?

The gifts we have to use for good are not distributed equitably—one may have five times as much as another, but that is no matter in God's kingdom. The first two stewards are given different amounts, but both are praised equitably: Well done, good and trustworthy soul.

The third is castigated for living in fear, for hunkering down, for stifling the talent (the gift) he was given. There is something instructive in that.

And if the final verse in today's passage leaves you in contorted discomfort, as he is thrown into the outer darkness, the hellish existence I mentioned earlier, just remember that we say in our Creed each week that Jesus descended to the dead, into hell, to bring good news to all who find themselves in such a hellish existence through whatever means led to their anguished incarceration there.

This is the penultimate parable Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel. From here he moves to Jerusalem, his arrest and crucifixion. His death is a confluence of imperial violence, stark injustice, dread fear, AND profligate love for the whole of creation, including you and me.

This parable only makes sense, no matter what interpretation you choose to take into your worldview, when seen through the perspective of Jesus' crucified arms of love on the cross, that went to hell and back, for

everyone who has ever lived or ever will on this fragile earth, our island home. Resurrection has the final word, even we cannot fully know that reality yet.

So what I'd say is that if your take on this parable leaves you unsettled, or wanting for more, that's okay. Maybe consider moving proverbially to a different seat in life and see what insights that worldview offers you. We need not have it all figured out on this side of the grave to know that Jesus is inviting us into something larger than ourselves, something good and faithful and trustworthy and true, and that is good news.

So the Bible said, and it still is news. Good news.

Matthew 25:14-30 *[Jesus said, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, `Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, `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.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, `Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, `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.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, `Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, `You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' "]*

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