

Sometimes I think that we are so far removed from the world of the Bible that we can't possibly understand Jesus' parables. And then sometimes, they hit all too close to home. Consider the parable of the talents. We may not know what it was like back when a person was either a slave or owned slaves, but if you listen closely to this parable, it's amazing how it illustrates our situation today here in what we could call the capital of venture capital.

Now here's a very rich guy, and he leaves his property with three subordinates before taking off on a journey. To get an idea of the size of his portfolio, it's handy to know that a talent is a unit of money equal to about 15 years of the average worker's pay. So, for instance, five talents is 75 years of salary, or about 230 pounds of silver. Back then money was heavy.

But since we don't trade in real money anymore, let's say this is stock. So two of his assistants start buying and selling it and get some really good tips or get really, really lucky. We don't know the details, but somehow they manage to make a return of 100%. When the master comes home, he doesn't bother to ask where or how they made all that money. He doesn't seem to care whether their actions were legal or ethical. He's just happy that they made him a richer man. He says to them: "Enter into the joy of your master." [Mt 25:21, 23]

Now tell me, does this master sound a bit like an inside trader? Just this week, there was another multibillion-dollar fine against six banks that were caught fixing prices on foreign currency. And yet in the conventional interpretation of this passage, the master doesn't live in Manhattan; he lives in heaven. According to tradition, the master is God.

But if this master is indeed "a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed,"

[Mt 25:24] if this master is essentially harvesting someone else's field, stealing the fruits of someone else's labor, we have to ask ourselves: is this the God we know and love in Jesus Christ?

To answer that question, we have to consider a few things. First of all, parables are very tricky passages. They are made up of metaphors and so their meanings are very malleable. You can stretch a parable to mean a lot of different things to a lot of different folks just by reading the parable from a lot of different perspectives. That's part of the beauty of it and why there is so much truth in it.

Now we normally read this parable from the perspective of the master because we naturally want to identify with the winner. But nowhere does it say in our text that the master is God, and so it is perfectly legitimate to take a different approach.

Let's read this parable from the perspective of the loser, the one who was called a "wicked and lazy slave." [Mt 25:26] First we ask, why does this slave bury his treasure in the ground? He says that it's because he was afraid of his master. [Mt 25:25] And it would seem that he has good reason to be afraid. The master doles out money to each slave according to his ability, so the one-talent slave already gets the idea that he isn't worth as much as the other two. Like a lot of people in the world, he starts out with a strike against him. He suspects that the game is stacked against him, so he's afraid. And later he will be punished for that fear.

But the parable offers us another possibility. Maybe there's another reason why he buries his money in the ground. He knows his master is harsh. He knows that he is greedy and unscrupulous. So why work for this guy? Why should he labor to increase his master's wealth? Better to bury it in the ground where it can't do any harm.

Of course, when the master returns, he chastises the slave. At the very least, the slave should have deposited the money with the bankers and returned it with interest. [Mt 25:27] But that raises another issue of justice. Bankers usually get a black eye in the Bible. For one thing, it was against Jewish law to charge interest on loans to other Jews, but bankers routinely ignored this law. Also, back then, interest rates were sky high—20%, 30%, even 50%. It was an incredibly abusive way to make money off of people who didn't have any. So, by burying his money in the ground, at least the slave could be sure that he wasn't contributing to this system of exploitation.

As you can see, from the perspective of the slave, we get a very different parable, don't we? Now what do we do with it?

We have a problem with this interpretation. This parable in Matthew comes in a collection of parables about the kingdom of heaven; it's supposed to tell us something about God's

kingdom. But this doesn't sound like heaven to me. In fact, this winner-loser story reminds me of what's happening here on earth. In our economy the winners routinely throw out the losers, and those who have much get more and those who have nothing get even what they have taken away from them. [Mt 25:29] Too often, that's the way it is, and there's no denying it anymore: the gap between the have's and have-not's in our society is growing more and more.

So what do we do with this parable? Read the verses leading up to this story. In them, Jesus is warning the disciples about the coming judgment. He tells them that when they see these signs, they will know that our time is near. [Matthew 24:33] I wonder whether this parable isn't pointing out one of those signs and indicating to us that the time is near. As the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, the situation becomes all the more unsustainable. Here in Silicon Valley, the person cleaning your home could easily be homeless. The fast food

worker that serves you a burger may not be able to put food on their own table. And that is not what the kingdom of God looks like. So I believe that the persistence of homelessness and hunger in one of the wealthiest counties in the country is a sure sign that the party is just about over.

What can we do about it? The one-talent slave made a choice basically to do nothing about it. He's like people who don't approve of what's happening, so they decide to go live in a yurt in the mountains of Montana. They opt out of a system that seems to them to be beyond redemption. But just doing nothing that perpetuates evil will not stop the evil.

John Wesley's complaint about this slave is that he was harmless. Like a lot of good Christians, he thought he could do good by doing nothing. And just as I'm writing this, I'm getting an email from Rev. Larry George, Wayne William's first assistant when he was here at Willow Glen. He is sending me one of Wayne William's favorite quotes, so I can include it in his

memorial bulletin. It's from the philosopher, Edmund Burke (1729-1797). It reads: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

I think Wayne Williams would have said that in this scenario, the slave could have done something. Just because you don't have as much as the masters of Silicon Valley, doesn't mean that you can't do as much or even more for the people who live here.

It's not enough to whine about the way things are. Speaking of whining, while none of us like what is going on in our government at various levels, nationwide only 36% of us went to the polls two weeks ago. Less than a third voted in California. And that's a good way to bury a democracy.

Every single vote makes a difference. So does every dollar. Wesley once preached that every pound we put in an earthly bank (in other words, every dollar we keep that we don't need) is sunk. It's as if we buried it in the ground; it earns no interest



above. But every pound we give to the poor goes into the bank of heaven and it gains us glorious interest, interest that will keep accumulating for all eternity. [“The More Excellent Way” #89, 1787]

So in my interpretation of this parable, I have to come to the conclusion that the slave, as well as his master, is in need of redemption. In other words, our whole society needs a bottom-to-top transformation. And we better get to it, for here comes the kingdom.

The very next passage in the Bible is the story of the Last Judgment. And this is, in the final analysis, why I don't want to think that the master in our parable is God. Because when the Son of Man comes in glory to judge the nations, he doesn't ask anyone, not the sheep on his right hand nor the goats on his left, how much money they made. Nor does he care. He only wants to know if they loved society's losers as much as they loved the winners. Did they see the hungry and give them food,

the thirsty and give them a drink? Did they see someone who was a stranger and welcome them? In prison and visit them? Naked and clothe them? For, he said, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." [Mt 25:40]

Now for those of us who fear that we are more like the worthless slave than anyone else in this story, the message is that we aren't so worthless after all. I've been asked to speak, to offer a religious perspective, at the affordable housing rally on Tuesday, and I will come up with something to say. And while I know full well that our little rally won't bring God's kingdom to Silicon Valley, we *can* bring some hope to those who are weeping and gnashing their teeth after being thrown into the outer darkness of our community. What I hope, what I pray, is that more people in this valley will come to know our true Master, who is a God of justice, love, and mercy.