

The allegory strikes again!!!

Let's start with the "man" who was about to take a journey. Man. Here's a rather generous adjective to describe a slave owner, the very definition of all that is inhumane. But anyway, this man, or this master, is supposed to be Jesus.

And then we have the three slaves to whom the man entrusts his properties, and they are supposed to represent the disciples. The properties are God's mission or desire for God's world. The journey is the distance from the right now until Christ's return. The rewards and punishments are the eschatological returns on investment.

Those who have more in this arrangement keep getting more, keep thriving; those who have less and do less keep losing, will be met with darkness.

And just like last week, if we play out this allegory, the righteous line up to align themselves with the haves, and they find a way to assign those they deem unrighteous with the have-nots. And just like last week, the God of creation, justice, salvation, and grace is shoe-horned into the story in order to justify the inequitable politics and economics of the current system.

Frankly, I don't have the energy this morning to contort the kingdom of God into a working plantation. But nor do I have the energy to convince each of you of why it's not one. God doesn't own anyone; God doesn't expel anyone; God doesn't run a commodities exchange. People, powerful people, conjure up images of God in roles like master, warden, and broker in order to perpetuate the myth of their power.

But the truth, the truth is: God is love. God is love!!! Love, love, love!!! And nothing in this parable, nothing in our sacred texts, nothing in this world, can, or ever will change the certainty and finality of God's love for creation.

I want to encourage you to hang on to this truth as you read sacred texts. It's a much better tool than allegory. Because if we hold onto the truth and certainty of

God's love; it's not God that we need to litigate, it's the systems that claim to represent God that need litigating.

There were sixteen talents distributed in this morning's text. I think it's fair to say that if you had ten, or five, or even one talent, you would have the resources to accomplish just about anything you wanted to. Imagine a blank check so big that you could start your own business; you could finally renovate that property; you could fund a grant to support your favorite charity; you could have a transformative impact on your community.

So we hear this story, and our initial reaction is to chastise the person that is afraid to fail. God has given this person every resource to succeed, and yet he/she is paralyzed by fear. And this fear is not met with empathy, but is instead met with punishment and alienation.

Well, I don't know about you, but I am not content with a world where one out of every three people, despite having access to all that is necessary to prosper and thrive, find themselves paralyzed by fear about a God who judges them too harshly, who will refuse to see their value; who will never reward them for their efforts, no matter how hard they try.

I don't think there's anything wrong with God. I think there's too much wrong with how we make God known. A few questions:

Are you really telling me that the same God who asked Israel to covenant that it would not charge interests on loans to neighbors is mad about treasure buried in a hole not earning interest in a bank? Are you really telling me that the same God who offered manna in the wilderness, something that you couldn't hoard, is gonna give another talent to the fella that's already got ten of them?

I'm sorry, but I don't buy that logic. At least not as an allegory.

To be fair though, I haven't, at least up until this week, lived in a world where it would be seditious to criticize the cruelty of the patronage system. And Jesus, and all the people like him who told stories, would have had to use coded language, or else they wouldn't have finished telling many of these stories.

So, if I was a wealthy landowner, a man, or an in-hu-man by 2020 standards, I would most likely be delighted to hear stories spun about laborers and servants and slaves who double my investments, and fear my retribution, and confuse my power for generosity. And of course, if I was a laborer, or a servant, or a slave, I would also understand that the moment I heard about a master giving one of my peers ten million dollars to invest, was the very moment I was being invited into a story with hidden meaning.

This isn't about spending the master's money. This is about belonging to a Creator who operates a benevolent world. When we do well, there's not a limit to our happiness and abundance; God expands the avenues to use our gifts and open new possibilities. Caesar's world is only gonna let us get so far.

And this isn't about settling accounts. The man who's afraid to spend isn't scolded for a loss of profits. He's scolded for not believing in the gifts God has given him.

So for me, the parable illumines a painful truth. Despite my personal knowledge of God; despite my personal sense of affirmation, encouragement, and "investment opportunities" received from God; there are too many other neighbors who are sitting on buried treasures.

We have too many neighbors who cannot see a future full of possibilities, who cannot see their own lives as fertile investments in God's world. Maybe it's grief; maybe it's addiction; maybe it's being told "no" too many times; maybe it's hearing too many false stories of a retributive, zapping God; maybe it's not having access to the things God seeks to grant us all freely, but Caesar fails to distribute: clean air; clean water; nutritious food; shelter; companionship; value; humanity; dignity; good health; Maybe it's all of these things. But that hurt, and that pain, and that systemic failure must be addressed.

Clearly, in Matthew's gospel, this telling doesn't have a clean ending. The fearful servant, actually called lazy, is alienated, and cast into darkness. And we aren't really given a good resolution. We're still left two-thirds whole, and I'm sorry, but I don't round 66 percent to 100.

I recently re-watched the *Princess Bride*, and there's a wonderful scene near the end, where the grandson, played by Fred Savage, becomes irate with his grandfather, played by Peter Falk, when the story reveals that Westley does not exact his revenge on Prince Humperdinck. "What do you mean the prince lives," the grandson says, "Why did you make me read this story?!?"

Whether we are ten or one hundred, it's hard to accept life's intricacies, and even harder to hear stories that don't go the way we want them to, that sometimes make us feel powerless to affect change.

If you've seen the movie, you know that the grandson asks his granddaddy to come back again tomorrow so he can hear the story.

I think we would do well to keep re-engaging and re-hearing this parable. I think for starters, we might hear it as an illustration, but not a permanent reality. And maybe, the more we hear a story like this, the more we become inspired to work for a world where everyone is valued enough, encouraged enough, affirmed enough, supported enough to use their gifts. Maybe, we imagine a world where the rewarded servants refuse to accept their spoils in protest of the master's treatment of their peer? Maybe we imagine a world where it isn't a great idea for masters to be habitually absent or to continually expel one third of their labor force? Maybe we imagine that the kingdom of heaven is like listeners who demand the same justice for the story's characters as the storyteller demands of the listeners?

Friends, God has gifted us something pretty special: each other. If we want the kingdom to come, we've got to work for a world where everyone experiences a God who loves us into using and expressing our giftedness. And where all feel confident in reinvesting their talents.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.