

### **A Risky Business: A Meditation on the Parable of the Talents**

I'm going to open this morning by leveling with you: This is a difficult text. There are several parts of this story that make me uncomfortable and that, on hearing it this morning, likely made you uncomfortable too. But, the good news is that I'm a literature student, and I'm convinced that most of my literature professors choose their syllabi to maximize the discomfort of their students. So, you're in good hands this morning, or at least hands that are willing to engage with uncomfortable subjects, whether that be finances . . . or bad bosses . . . or eternal judgment.

More importantly, we're dealing with a parable, a story, and because I study literature and regularly engage with the tension between fiction and reality, I just wanted to clarify that my intention is not to provide us with a legend for this story (i.e. the master represents \_\_\_\_, the slaves represent \_\_\_\_, etc.). With parables, we always have to remember that we're dealing with a genre of story that expresses divine mysteries in everyday language and recognizable symbols, so I think it's fair to say that we're not meant to split hairs about which elements of the story directly correspond to our faith and which do not. Instead, I suggest that we wrestle with some of those hard questions that this story raises.

Before we get into some of the more difficult questions, however, let's establish our context. This parable opens with "For it is as if a man" (verse 14), so it's unclear at first what the subject of the parable is. The parable is part of a significant chunk of parables and teaching delivered to the disciples by Jesus on the Mount of Olives after they leave Jerusalem, which follows the Triumphal Entry, the clearing of the temple, and the public tests of the Pharisees. The previous parable, the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, is framed this way: "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this" (verse 1). So, this second parable seems to follow the previous parable and disclose something else about the kingdom of heaven. The word "heaven," of course, is a loaded one in our Christian tradition because it seems to send us into the realm of the afterlife. However, because this parable is framed in terms of a master leaving and entrusting his servants with his property, I think it's fair to imply that the immediate context is instruction for the disciples to whom Jesus is passing his ministry and that this parable therefore tells us something about the present work of Christ's representatives on Earth.

The problem, of course, with accepting that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven is already present among us, is that we can't delay or ignore this parable, even the tricky parts. So, let's start by talking about money. In the story, the master hands out talents to his slaves. A talent, a unit of money, was worth over 15 years of wages from the average laborer. So, even for the man entrusted with one talent, let alone the man entrusted with five, this is a significant responsibility and certainly more money than they ever would have seen at one time. Scholars have also suggested that banking and investing practices had only recently emerged around the time of this parable, and any investment or dealings with bankers (like the master refers to verse 27) were risky and unregulated. So, we have three slaves left with unfathomable amounts of money and no guarantee for a return on any investments they make.

This raises the question, how can we understand the talents or the resources/assets that we as followers of Christ inherit for the sake of the kingdom of heaven? Although there's certainly a financial dimension to this question, when I consider what it is that *we*, as people of faith, possess that we can invest in the world, I start to think of things like love, grace, compassion, concern for our neighbor, justice... These are resources beyond value and with significance beyond our understanding. And, much like investing talents, there's a risk that comes with investing these values in our world.

In her memoir, Barbara Brown Taylor, a former Episcopal priest, characterizes the vocation of a priest like this: "Her job is to recognize the holiness in things & hold them up to God. Her job is to speak in ways that help other people recognize the holiness in things too" (*Leaving Church: A Memoir of Church*). If we extend Taylor's definition to the priesthood of believers, we all share in this call to recognize what is holy, what is sacred, and what bears the image of God in the world around us. And this is fundamentally risky because it changes how we relate to our selves, to each other, and to our

environment, and to uphold these values means to challenge models of power that are based on opposite values.

Now, like any good parable, by landing on this interpretation of the talents, this leads to another question: What did the third slave do that was so wrong? By all appearances, it seems like the third slave made the safe, calculated choice and even the principled choice to not feed his master's greed. But if we return briefly to remember the weight of those resources I listed earlier of love and grace and justice, I think the rebuke and the punishment of the third slave reminds us, at a very basic level, of the stakes of the work of the kingdom.

To illustrate this, I have a story of my own. For almost all four years of my undergrad, I participated in our campus Inter-Varsity fellowship as one of the student leaders. Towards the end of my third year, one of the students we tried to recruit to our leadership team was my friend Joy. Joy, who is originally from Tibet, is one of those exceptional human beings who possess a deep well of faith and wisdom. Up until this point, Joy had been reluctant to commit herself to a position of leadership. So, I met Joy for coffee one day to try and convince her otherwise. In the course of our conversation, Joy raised one of her main concerns with the state of our fellowship, namely that our leadership and our norms as a community were largely dictated by a white, Canadian, evangelical tradition and that she, like other international students, felt alienated from the group. I agreed with her. It had been a problem that we had circled around as a leadership team for many years. So, I challenged Joy that day to join us and to start to do the work of changing the image and culture of leadership in our fellowship. Thankfully, she said yes, and so began one of my favorite seasons of leadership in that fellowship. We soon realized that Joy still wouldn't naturally speak up to take on the public roles of leadership, so, as a team, we adjusted to her personality and would simply tell her to do things her like praying or speaking during one of our gatherings or planning a prayer meeting. Every time, she would knock it out of the park. Joy was stepping into her gifts, and the rest of us had the privilege of watching this transformation and of learning from a different model of leadership, a different model of strength.

To step out of Joy's story for a minute, there is one thing I wanted to distinguish about Joy's story and one more problem I'd like to raise with our parable today. I'm so glad that Joy didn't "bury" her calling and reject our offer to join our leadership team, but our partnership and our dialogue and our challenges to one another took place because of established trust and because we chose to trust each other. To that point, I want to return briefly to the third slave's reason for burying his master's talent: "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed" (verse 24). This is the point in the parable where I'm willing to draw the line between fiction and allegory. Our ability to participate in the sometimes risky and overwhelming business of the kingdom of God is contingent on what we believe about the character of God, and it's my instinct about this passage that we are not supposed to accept the master in this parable as representative of that character.

One of the cardinal sins that we've repeated over and over again in the history of our faith is justifying oppressive and abusive power structures both sacred and secular by mapping those attributes of power onto God. Practically, describing God as a vindictive, greedy, and abusive slave master is not good news. This master is especially bad news for the kinds of people who we have been told are central to this new kingdom of heaven. Earlier in Matthew, we hear from Jesus that under this new system of God's rule on Earth, the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, are the ones who are blessed and the ones who will inherit this kingdom.

Instead we take part in the weight & risky work of the kingdom of heaven because we can trust the character of God. We can trust that we have been entrusted with much and empowered to do more, not out of fear of retribution if we fail, but because God's authority and presence and love will never fail us.