

The parables are generally challenging when it comes to probing their meanings, but man! This parable is particularly perplexing. Did you catch those last words on the lips of the master?

“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.”

Are you kidding me? This doesn't sound like the Jesus I know. And then this:

“As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

I have a confession to make. When I sent out the scripture to be read by various people in our church early this week I changed the word “slave” to “servant”. Why? Because somehow the idea of this rich guy with three servants instead of three slaves seemed less offensive. I apologize.

But slaves were what they were – the property of the rich man.

Not that these three slaves probably had particularly difficult lives, financially speaking. As top lieutenants in the rich guy's business operations, they surely lived lives that involved a good deal of comfort and luxury in comparison to the lot in life of the great majority of people who lived in those days.

One detail often gets breezed past when we hear this parable. Each of the three slaves are given various amounts of talents from their master. What exactly was “talent” in those days? Over 2000 years of interpretation of this parable we have come to think of a talent as some particular ability that we have been given. Say, you have a talent for singing, or a talent for organization.

But that's not what talents were in those days. A talent was a very big hunk of gold or silver -- maybe a hundred pounds worth. A single talent had the value of -- get this -- 20 years-worth of a common laborer's wages. That's how much money the one talent guy had in his possession. You can do the math: the two talent guy had 40 years-worth of a laborer's wages, and the five talent guy had a hundred years-worth of a laborer's wages. All told, enough money to hire a hundred and sixty laborers for an entire year.

The wage wasn't much, but receiving the wage could be the difference as to whether the laborer and his family starved.

We aren't told if the rich guy gave all his money to the three slaves -- maybe he has a lot more. But even if this is all his money, it is enough money to identify him in those days not merely as a member of the 1% but more likely the .001 per cent.

How was wealth accumulated in those days? Ancient Israel was primarily an agricultural economy, so the vast majority of workers were involved working the land to bring forth a harvest. Wealth came from acquiring land. At one point in time -- hundreds of years earlier

when the Hebrew people entered Palestine – each male was given a small parcel of land which he would work with the help of his wife and children in the hope of growing enough food to feed the family and if the crop was particularly abundant to sell at the what the family didn't need at the markets to get money for other stuff they needed.

But as any farmer can tell you, there is a variable in farming over which a farmer doesn't have much control, and that is the weather. Abundant harvests may come with sufficient rains but invariably there would be seasons of draught during which the farmer wouldn't be able to grow enough food to feed his family, let alone sell crops for other necessities.

What would he do then? Well, the farmer would be compelled to borrow money from somebody who had money stored away, but the borrowing typically took place with extreme interest rates, and so if the draught lasted any length -- well, the poor farmer would soon be in debt up to his eyeballs. What would be the inevitable outcome of such debt? The one from whom the money was borrowed would take possession of the land at which point the poor farmer would essentially become the slave of the new owner, getting paid a subsistence wage.

As the years passed with the same scenario getting played out tens of thousands of times – well, you can see where this would lead. A few very rich people would own the vast majority of the land with the vast majority of people dependent upon their good favor to eek out an existence.

Now the God of Israel wasn't happy that this could happen. To counteract this pattern of the rich continually getting richer and the poor getting poorer there was a law that you can look up in Leviticus 25 which said that every fifty years something called “the year of Jubilee” was to be enacted. On that year debts would be cancelled and land would be returned to its original owner.

There is little evidence that the law was actually carried out. The oppression of the poor by the rich was the kind of thing the Old Testament prophets were routinely crying out against. In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus begins his ministry in his hometown, he quotes Isaiah in declaring that the time had come for the year of Jubilee to be enacted – which surely provided part of the motivation for some of the hometown people to try to kill him there and then.

The pattern I'm describing to you should sound familiar because it is essentially the setting of the plot line of one of our most beloved movies of all time: “It's a Wonderful Life”. Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey tries to take a stand against the notorious Mr. Potter who is scheming in a similar way to become exceedingly rich at the expense of his neighbors.

So returning now to the parable, if we ask what the two talent and the five talent guys were doing with their master's money to make it double in size while he was away it is reasonable to assume that they were taking advantage of the whole rigged financial system, loaning money at impossible rates, and then taking possession of the land of poor farmers.

And when the master returns, he praises these two guys for having done so.

On the surface the parable seems to contradict a whole lot of what Jesus was about. This is one of the favorite parables of preachers who proclaim what is known as the “prosperity gospel”, which basically tells people God wants them to be rich and that -- with the right kind of faith -- they can count on becoming rich, which, I can assure you is not what Jesus taught. I’ve known poor people who regularly sent off checks to these preachers believing that in doing so they were demonstrating the kind of faith that would in time reap a great financial blessing – which never came to pass – it simple left them all the poorer for it.

My point in all this is that if we take the master of the story to be some kind of stand in for God, we have some serious problems with which to grapple.

We are approaching the end of the liturgical calendar which means the focus of the assigned reading turn our attention to the ultimate future of human history – that time when Christ will come and establish his Kingdom on earth.

The earliest Christians expected Jesus to come back in short order. But time passes without his return. By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel approximately 50 or 60 years had transpired since Jesus’ death and resurrection.

The 25th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel consists of three separate teachings that all seek to encourage his readers to keep in mind that even though his return is delayed the King is still coming and we need to be prepared.

First there’s a parable about ten bridesmaids waiting for a bridegroom so that the wedding feast can begin. Clearly in Matthew’s mind the bridegroom is a stand-in for Jesus. When he finally he comes, five bridesmaids aren’t ready.

Next comes this strange parable we’re considering today which involves a master going away and then finally returning.

In the story that follows this one, Jesus declares, “when the son of man returns with the angels” he will sit on his judgment seat, before which everybody will get judged.

Clearly, Matthew wants to make the point that when we stand before Jesus, we will be judged – held accountable for our actions.

But what will Jesus be concerned about when we stand before him? Not as this morning’s parable might suggest, whether we made wise investments with our stock portfolio if we happen to be fortunate enough to have one.

The last story – the one scheduled next week for Christ the King Sunday – lets us know what matters. The criteria for separating the sheep from the goats revolves around whether we lived our lives with compassion. Did we care about the people around us: the hungry, the thirsty, the

sick, the stranger, the people in prison – the people Jesus referred to as “the least of these my brothers and sisters.”

So returning to our strange parable, Matthew seems intent on reinforcing the notion that Jesus will return and there will be a great accounting of the lives we lived.

Parables by their very nature invite us to wrestle with them. They don't necessarily have a definitive once-for-all interpretation. We can hear different things at different times in the parables of Jesus.

I read about an interpretation of this parable this week that turns our usual hearing on its head. Usually, the two and five talent guys are thought to be the positive examples – the heroes – and the one talent guy the example of who not to be like.

But given all that I've been describing about the economic realities of the time, maybe the one talent guy is the hero of the story. Perhaps by burying the talent he is taking a principled stand -- refusing to participate in the system of generating wealth at the expense of the poor that was considered normal. He does so even though he knows there will be a severe price to pay. He will be stripped of what little he has and thrown into the outer darkness.

But who does that remind you of? In the very next chapter of Matthew's Gospel you know what happens? Jesus is arrested, stripped, mocked, and in the chapter after that he is crucified and his dead body deposited in the deep darkness of a tomb outside the city gates.

Interesting.

As we approach Christ the King Sunday, there are two truths we are obliged to hold in tension. One truth is the graciousness, the mercy of the God who has been revealed to us in Jesus – a God who loves us no matter what.

We remember another parable that is also only found in Matthew's Gospel -- one that involves a rich owner of a vineyard and several day laborers who go out at varying hours of the day. When it comes time to receive the wage for their work, the big surprise is that the guy who only managed to put in a single hour of work gets paid the full day's wage. The graciousness of the master is revealed in giving now what they “deserve” but rather what they need – the wage without which the laborers' families might well starve.

Jesus died on the cross for us not because we had proved ourselves worthy, but because he loved us in spite of the ways we routinely betray him – fail to live out the love to which he called us.

God's grace is the truth on one side of the tension but on the other side is the truth that we will be judged -- held accountable for the lives we live.

In that sense the old interpretation still holds – God gives us the gift of life the value of which is beyond measure and the question we are presented with through the course of our lives is – what have I done with this precious gift?

The question comes into sharp focuses in such a time as this. Are we a part of the solution, or a part of the problem. Have we extended ourselves in care and compassion towards others – particularly those less fortunate than ourselves? Or did we only recognize a responsibility to ourselves? Did we see life as a great competition to be won – a quest to defeat our enemies? Or did we come to see that we really are all in this together?

I have been moved by what I have experienced within our congregation in these trying times. Countless offers to provide help to those in need, faithful giving to keep our critical ministries going, generous contributions to my pastor's discretionary fund with which I provide assistance to people who have come closed to the edge.

This is what the God will be looking for when the final evaluation of our lives takes place.