

“A Talent for Trouble”

It will probably not surprise you that I am not a fan of the traditional interpretation of this parable. I am also tired of the clever sermons that turn on the multiple meanings of the word “talent.” When Matthew wrote this gospel he had no idea that *τάλαντον* (talanton) in Greek would have a homonymy in the English language (a language that did not exist and a people he had never heard of). To Matthew and his contemporaries a talent was a huge sum of money; usually a brick of precious metal such as silver. One talent was equal to about sixteen years of labor. In today’s money that would be about \$1 million (2018 average US household income \$63,179 x 16= \$1,010,864). So the master was leaving between \$1 million and \$5 million in the hands of these slaves or overseers while he traveled. These are otherworldly sums, but remember that Jesus has a penchant for hyperbole.

The usual interpretation tells us that the master is God and we are the slaves. Those of us that use our God-given gifts to further the kingdom, in this case by making more money, are the good slaves who use their talents. The one who tucks it neatly away is the bad slave who does not use his talent. In this interpretation the homonymy is important especially when it is a stewardship sermon. If we do as the “bad” slave did then we can be certain that the master (God) will consign us to the “outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.”¹

There are multiple problems with this interpretation. First of all, the master is a slave owner and profiteer. He does not seem to be the best stand in for God. Second, the master goes away. The Jewish and Christian understanding of God is that God is omnipresent. Jesus would not tell us God is taking a vacation from the creation and leaving some humans in charge; we know that is never a good idea. Third, these slaves are instructed to take vast sums of money and make more. The problem there is that these slaves are overseers of property. The best, if not the only way, to increase the value is by loaning it to poor farmers at exorbitant rates. If the farmers repay the loans the master gets wealthier. If the farmers’ crops fail they default and their collateral their land, is taken. They are left landless and destitute. You may remember the parable of the vineyard owner. The reason he could go back throughout the day and find more day laborers was that so many had been dispossessed of their land. There is no down side for the master or his money manager.

It seems to me that there are huge problems with this interpretation. It certainly does not seem to be what Jesus was trying to communicate about the Kingdom of Heaven. I was encouraged to read several commentaries that had similar problems with this traditional interpretation. In one of the commentaries, called “Journey with Jesus,” the author, Debi Thomas, relayed reading this story to her son, to get his reaction. She wrote,

I read [my son] the parable of the talents, fully expecting him to hate it— and he astonished me with his reaction: “That’s a great passage!” he said. “It sums up everything Christianity is about. I love it!” Baffled, I asked him what exactly he “loved.” “Oh, isn’t it obvious? I love how the third slave is the hero of the story!”²

¹ Matthew’s favorite way to end a parable, but I suspect it was not Jesus’.

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

He heard the parable with new ears, because he had not been conditioned by numerous sermons using the traditional interpretation. Instead of hearing the parable as a prescription for how we are to behave, he heard it as a description of how to resist the wicked ways of this world—avarice, taking advantage of the poor, and accumulation of wealth at the expense of all else.

A few weeks ago we heard the parable of the wedding banquet. Remember that the “guest” whom we had been taught to see as bad for not wearing the proper attire. He was actually making a statement by not dressing up for a banquet that he was being forced to attend. By not dressing up he was standing up to the might of the king and his arrogant and self-aggrandizing ways.

Here again we have someone who is speaking truth to power. The third slave did not do the expected thing. He stood up to the oppressive master refusing to cheat more families out of their livelihood. As he said, “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.” He was not afraid for himself but for those who would fall prey to the wickedness of the master. He refused to go along with the master’s scheme and returned to the master what was his—no more and no less.

This slave and the wedding guest were examples of what the late Congressman John Lewis called “good trouble.” Lewis said, “Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.” That is what Debi Thomas’ son was focusing on when he described the third slave as the hero and saying “It sums up everything Christianity is about.” He sees the slave getting into good trouble by defying the master. While the slaves who did the master’s bidding may have entered “into his joy,” they did so at a great cost through immoral lending at extortionate interest rates, robbing the poor of their livelihood, and skimming profits for themselves.

Jesus was not offering this parable as a window into the Kingdom of Heaven. Rather he was showing us that we have to stand up to injustice when we see it even if the cost is to be cast in the outer darkness. Let’s not forget that Jesus’ own ministry and teaching got him crucified by the forces of empire and religious privilege.

The easy interpretations of parables are usually not what Jesus intended. Jesus tells us that to follow him is not to take the easy way, but taking up our own cross. It can mean being at odds with the culture that prizes money over people and power over compassion. Compassion for others, our neighbors throughout the world, is the key to the kingdom. As the gospel song tells us,

“Oh we got the keys to the kingdom
And our faith unlocked the door
Oh we got the keys to the kingdom Lord
And the world couldn’t do us no harm”