

“The View from the Bottom of a Hole”

Matt 25:14-30

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Across Church street from our parking lot,
backing up to the apartment building on South Main, is a big empty lot.
In fact it's three lots and a little more
under current zoning here in Blacksburg.
The church bought the big plot of land in 1967,
a few years after this building was finished,
with the thought that it might be a wise investment
in case room was needed for expansion in future years.
And it was wise, but the expansion never came.
Over the years, some of you have told me,
there has been discussion after discussion
about various things that might be done with the lot,
or about selling it in order to fund a program or purpose elsewhere.
None of those things, though, has come to be.
Meanwhile, building and paving above us and around us
has meant that more and more water
gets funneled downhill to our sloping empty lot,
making it more and more expensive
to meet current standards for coping with water runoff.
There our lot sits, empty except for the times
when Sarah Windes may go over there or Forrest Thye brings over
children to some garden plots,
and offering a green if uneven patch
where the residents of the apartment building
sun themselves in the summertime.

Last year the director of our local Habitat for Humanity, Shelley Fortier,
gave a talk to the Ministerial association
about the need for affordable housing in town.
I mentioned the lot, and soon Shelley came to a Session meeting
to talk about the possibility of building
seven or eight three-bedroom townhomes
to be designated for low-wealth owners and renters for at least
99 years.

The Session agreed, and Community Ministry is on board.
And on Thursday here in our sanctuary
the Presbytery of the Peaks approved
our donation of the land to the project.
As I hope you know, our land is the entire Presbytery church's land,
not just ours, and they had to approve it and they did.

The Town has been involved from the beginning
and is very much in favor.
An engineering firm has donated services
and designed a plan to deal with the water runoff according to code.
Next month we go to the zoning board to get permission
to re-zone the lots for the project,
and have every reason to believe that will succeed.
Meanwhile Habitat has started raising money, working toward
the 1.2 million dollars necessary to bring the townhomes into being.
And of course they are hoping for grant money.
It looks good. It looks possible, but there is much to be done
before we can know for sure whether our lot
will become homes for seven or eight low-wealth families
or remain an unused talent buried, as it were, in the ground.

The parable of the talents has often been read
as a parable about using your individual gifts and skills
to the fullest in the service of God.
But there are more than a few things about the parable
that suggest it can be read in an even larger, more dynamic way.
For one thing, if you look at what lies on either side,
you'll find it follows two parables about faithful waitingⁱ (1);
about a servant keeping watch over his master's house,
and wise virgins whose lamps are always filled with oil.
Then on the heels of the parable of the talents
is a story about members of the true church,
who give food and drink and clothes
to a hungry, thirsty, naked world.
The story of giving to the least of these.
Placement of a story in scripture is never accidental,
so it's reasonable to assume that the parable of the talents
has something in common with these two stories
that come behind and before.

Then there is the meaning of the word "talent."
The word does not refer to your operatic skills,
or your ability to subdue cantankerous church plumbing.
A talent was a 75-pound gold ingot, a lottery win, worth
6,000 denari, which, depending on who you read,
adds up to what a day laborer earned in 15 to 20 yearsⁱⁱ.
So conservatively, if a day laborer in the US today earns \$30,000 a year,
one talent would be four hundred and fifty thousand dollars!

Listen to the story with modern numbers:
*"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and
entrusted his property to them; to one he gave two-and-quarter million
dollars, to another nine-hundred thousand, to another four-hundred and
fifty thousand, each according to his ability, then he went away. The one*

who had received two-and-a-quarter million went off at once and traded with it, and she made two-and-a-quarter million more. In the same way the one who had nine-hundred thousand made nine-hundred thousand more. But the one who had received four hundred fifty thousand went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money...."

Gives the text a slightly different feel, doesn't it!

Of course, even with a more explicit economic example of what a "talent" was, you can still read the story as being about individuals with different levels of financial savvy, using what they know with differing results.

You can read it that way, until the *last* part of the parable, the part that is most troubling.

The part of the story where the master, who is the stand-in for God in most of our minds, confronts the one-talent slave, and both of them say a host of disturbing things.

Surely the reaction of the one-talent slave is the heart of the parable.

When the master confronts the one-talent slave about not taking any risks with the master's gift, the man says this:
"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed, and I was afraid, so I went and hid your money in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

The master then repeats what the one-talent slave says about him word for word, and acts in way consistent with what the slave said!

The master takes the money from him and gives it to the slave who has four and half million, and casts the one-talent slave away.

The trouble is that, read this way, the master turns out to be the harsh overlord the one-talent slave expected as he looked up from the bottom of his hole.

Have you ever stood in a deep hole and looked up?

You can't see very much.

One summer my family and I went out west, where we climbed in and out of various kivas, ceremonial underground rooms made by ancient pueblo Indians accessible by ladder.

The kivas themselves were surprisingly pleasant, with light coming in from an opening above and often a second opening to make a good draft

for a fire was going in the center of the room.
Often there were shelf-like niches dug into the walls
and the earth under your feet was packed smooth and even.
Inside the kiva could be a cozy haven, you can live there
but you can't see much when you look out,
only the little bit of sky or cave overhang above the opening,
or the distorted bottom-up view
of anyone standing above you at the entrance hole.

The one-talent man had just such a distorted view of the master,
a compressed, foreshortened view
as fixed as the hard-packed earth under his feet.
From the narrow hole over his head he saw
only a harsh and punishing overlord,
someone to avoid interacting with, someone to fear,
someone who was handing out responsibility he never wanted.
Convinced of his point of view,
he buried the money in the ground.
With that kind of understanding of his master,
it seemed like the only thing to do.

Years ago my husband Robert befriended
a wonderfully bright and funny guy
who had a jazz radio program in Mobile, Alabama. I'll call him "John."
John and Robert shared all kinds of interests.
When John started dating "Susan," the four of us
spent lots of fun time together.
This was also the period when Robert and I
were getting more involved in our Presbyterian church,
and the more involved we got,
the more we wanted to share church with our friends.
Both John and Susan weren't interested.
They had both had church experiences in which God was an overlord,
making marks on long lists of things people did wrong,
always looking for opportunities to hurl somebody
into the outer darkness.
When I tried to talk to them about the God of *my* experience
—gracious, open, generous and loving—
they would hear none of it.
They were very confident of the god they saw
from the bottom of the hole their experience had dug.
It was all they could see, and it was no choice at all,
so they chose no god.
They were right from their own point of view.
If the only choice I had had was between a spiteful overlord
or no God at all, I might make the same choice.

The thing is, you can't *talk* someone
out of the god they can only see from bottom of a hole.
I tried talk, and it was no good.
Rob and I ended up moving to Atlanta so I could go to seminary,
but if we had stayed, the option that *might* have helped
would have been for us to *live* John and Susan
out of their one-talent God
—by being a three or a five-talent friends,
real bearers of faith who believed in a limitless God.
My arguments simply dug their hole deeper,
made the opening smaller and farther away.
So you could say John and Susan made two correct choices,
to give up on the one-talent God and its mouthy companion.

The other two slaves were not looking up from the bottom of a hole.
When they looked at the master, they saw someone else entirely.
Someone who knew and cared about them,
who saw them realistically and gave to them accordingly.
Someone who trusted them incredibly.
Someone who hoped they would try themselves
and take faithful risks.
Someone who gave exactly the same reward
—*exactly the same*—to both of them,
even though one accomplished a lot more than the other.
They acted like slaves of a generous master
and reaped a wonderful reward.
If they had risked and lost everything,
you have to wonder whether they wouldn't *still* have received
an open armed-welcome.

When the master speaks to the one talent slave,
and takes the money away and gives it to the slave
who already has the most,
the one-talent slave's point of view seems smart.
But what if the master isn't agreeing with the one-talent slave.
What if the master is quoting him
instead of agreeing with his descriptionⁱⁱⁱ:
“What? You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sew,
and gather where I did not scatter? That's what you thought of me,
yet even so you buried my money in the ground?”
The one-talent man's actions look preposterous in this light.
When the master takes what was already useless,
buried money, and leaves the slave in the darkness he had already dug,
it is less a punishment than a foregone conclusion.

There is a children's picture book I think I've talked about before

about a mean, mean man
 who kicks dogs and hates children and everybody else
 and never, ever shares anything.^{iv}

He marries a mean, mean woman and has a gaggle
 of horrible children who bite and grab and yell
 and hate everyone, too, especially their parents.

As you read the story to a little child,
 first you feel a sense of alarm and then a growing satisfaction
 as the child is filled with delight as the mean, mean man
 becomes more and more entrenched
 in the small, ugly life he has chosen.

That's not a Christian response, I know,
 but it sure is satisfying and children love the ending.

The book ends as it ought to, with the mean, mean man
 and the mean, mean woman sitting in the dark,
 and the promise that that's how they still live today.

You cannot throw someone into a darkness
 they have already chosen as their preferred place to live.

Preacher and teacher Tom Long agrees.
 "This story is not about a generous master
 suddenly turning cruel and punitive," he writes.

 "It's about living with the consequences of one's own faith.
 If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out
 with eyes wide open to the grace in life
 and discover the joy of God's providence everywhere....
 Those who live in the confidence that God is trustworthy and generous...
 find more and more of that generosity;...
 those who run and hide under the bed from a bad,
 mean, scolding God...
 condemn themselves to a life spent under the bed alone,
 quivering in needless fear^v.

The late humorist Erma Bombeck
 was an outstanding theologian in my book.
 She also saw the wisdom of living full out.

Once asked if she had a stash of ideas she had saved over the years
 so that she could be guaranteed to have
 something to write about for her column every week,
 she replied with a column titled "What's Saved Is Often Lost."

Confessing that she came from "a family of savers
 who were sired by poverty and who worshiped at the alter of self-denial,"
 she started to notice some things:

Throughout the years she saw "a fair number of my family
 who have died leaving candles that have never been lit,
 appliances that never got out of the box."

"It gets to be a habit [this holding back]...She goes on:
 "I have learned that silverware tarnishes when it isn't used,

perfume turns to alcohol,
candles melt in the attic over the summer,
and ideas that are saved for a dry week often become dated.

“I always had a dream that when I am asked
to give an accounting of my life to a higher court,
it will be like this:

‘So, empty your pockets. What have you got left of your life?
Any dreams that were unfulfilled?

Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born
that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments
or bits of love that you haven’t spread around?’

“And I will answer, ‘I have nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me.
I am as naked as the day I was born’”^{vi} AMEN.

ⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in the series: *Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Pres: Louisville, Kentucky, 1993, p. 283.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. p. 286. Hare says 20 years. Other sources suggest 16 plus.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 1997, p. 283

^{iv} *That Mean Man*, Liesel Moak Skorpen, Harper and Rowe, 1968

^v Long, p. 283.

^{vi} My thanks to Mary Jane Cornell for passing on excerpts from the Erma Bombeck column “What’s Saved is Often Lost.”