

Texts: Matthew 25:14-30; Psalm 123; excerpt from [“Beyond Vietnam; A Time to Break the Silence” by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)

This is the latest in a whole run of gospel readings from the lectionary that just kind of take the wind right out of you. Last week you'll remember that in the story of the bridesmaids (wise and foolish), the bridesmaids who didn't bring along extra oil get left out in the cold. Late to the party? Too bad for you. It's not quite the image we have of a generous God; it's not the image we like to hold for a generous welcome.

And now this parable, commonly referred to as the parable of the talents. Like many parables, it's hard to understand on the surface. But unlike some of our favorite parables like, say, the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the parable of the Prodigal Son, the story doesn't seem to reward generous behavior, or signal that it is good and right to practice forgiveness, or that we shouldn't think too highly of ourselves. Those parables are clearly stories of good news. This parable, as it's most commonly interpreted, seems to be mostly bad news.

A master goes away on a long journey and leaves the servants (or, more accurately slaves –already we don't like this...) and he gives his fortune to the slaves - one gets five talents, another gets two and the third receives one talent.

A word about language and finance here. I'm not going to use the word talent any more, in part because that doesn't really give a sense of how much money we're talking about and in part because even though we know it's currency, a sum of money, I can't help but overlay it with the more modern understanding of skills, gifts, strengths.

So, I'm going to use some alternative terminology here. A talent, in the time of Jesus, was equivalent to 15 years of wages for a laborer. So, in modern monetary translation – Oregon minimum wage – yearly income \$17, 000 times 15 years – about \$255 thousand, or just over a quarter million dollars. So, instead of saying “talent,” something that sounds modest and like a gift or a strength, let's say a Quarter of a million dollars. – or, if that's too much effort, let's just call it a yacht. So we're in the realm of high finance here – we're in the realm of the 1 %.

Okay, so the first slave goes and “invests” his one and a quarter million dollars, and wow, he makes another one and a quarter million dollars. How'd he do that? Overtime? Probably not. Insider trading? Perhaps? Loan shark? Could be... Payday loans? Entirely possible. In any case, he reaped an outrageous profit. Same thing with the second slave – 100% return on investment. The third slave? Well.....

In the traditional interpretation of this parable, the third slave is a coward, a slacker, and someone who is not willing to work hard, to invest his talent (see why I prefer the word “yacht?") toward working for the kingdom. And those of us who have been exposed to this interpretation are left wondering what we have to do to work harder to employ our gifts, our skills, our income, in the service of the Master.

Either way, as I said, it really takes the wind out of you. We have to ask ourselves the question: Where's the good news here?

So my question is: Who says that God, the maker of all and the mother or all, and the lover of all that lives is a cruel, nasty capitalist exploiter? Who says that God is the master in this story? Why do we think we have to emulate the first slave or the second one, doing our best to please the master? Is the master in this story really the God of Grace and Glory that loves us and has our best wishes at heart? I don't think so.

Maybe what we need to do is to take our cues from the third slave (Mr. Slacker). He's not Mr. Slacker – he's mister resister – he recognizes injustice when he sees it, and he chooses not to participate in it. Here's how he describes the master to his face:

I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.

Well, this is a poetic turn of phrase, but what does it really mean? It means the master harvests in fields that he did not plant. He profits from other people's work. So, either he's a very canny investor, or he's a thief. Either way, he is characterized as an exploiter. And the third slave will have none of it, thank you. His choice was not to have his share of the fortune used to exploit others. He didn't go with the status quo, didn't take part in the fleecing of his brothers and sisters. He didn't foreclose on his neighbor's home, nor did he pay himself 100 times what other slaves make. He refuses to take part in an unfair system. The third slave acts as though the reign of God is already upon us. He has higher hopes – much higher – than merely gaining a 100% return on his investment. He hopes for justice.

Earlier this month we celebrated All Saints Day, recognizing the cloud of witnesses who have come before us, encouraging our walk in Christian life and proclaiming the truth of the gospel, the good news of God's love and making the same demands as the prophets and psalmists of old. MLK is one of those saints – in this morning's other reading, he called our nation – more than 30 years ago – to the kind of accounting that we need to be about right now – he calls us to be about building the reign of God here and now – he calls us, as he puts it, to mold a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood and a sisterhood.

The status quo is just as recalcitrant now = perhaps more so – than it was when King delivered those words on April 4, 1967 in Riverside Church. But something is happening here. The words of the psalmist are echoed in parks and encampments around our nation: Have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

Something is happening here. In college classrooms, for the first time in years, students engaged in an ethics simulation are choosing care and concern for one another over the opportunity to make high grades at the expense of other students.

Ethics simulation -

Something is happening here. Is it the inbreaking of the reign of God? We don't know for sure – but we can't be sure it isn't – and we can't ignore the possibility that it might be. Sure, it doesn't look much like we thought it would – but when it comes to God, when it comes to Jesus, isn't that a mistake that we find ourselves making over and over?

Something is happening here – in our world, in our classrooms, in our parks. Something's happening here at Bridgeport, as well – we are building on our strong foundation, leaning into the future, acknowledging and celebrating the Grace of God that brought us together as church not so many years ago, and we are acknowledging and celebrating the grace of God that calls us to continue to grow, to gather, to sing, to discern, to pray and to worship and to find the way in which we will call God's reign of justice and peace into being.

Oh Lord, make haste to help us. For we cannot, and we should not, and we will not do it alone.

The third slave has called out the master and has paid a high price. How shall we respond?
We must seek an Occupation. Of our parks and public lands, perhaps. Of our hearts, most assuredly.
What would Jesus occupy?

If God is as good as we trust, if our love is stronger than our pride,
Jesus will occupy...
our hearts,
our minds,
our homes,
our world – until such time as every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground become level, and the rough places a plain.

Let Jesus occupy this space, this community, this moment, in hope and confidence for the inbreaking of the reign of God.