

**Proper 28A**

**Knowing Jesus on Judgment Day**

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Let's just start with getting it out there: The parable in today's Gospel is one of the more challenging to understand. To some it is not only difficult, it seems devoid of any comfort, or words of wisdom and it seems to lack clarity as to what it is really about. I read several commentators who said this parable is about money, plain and simple. Which I think is sort of odd, because no one says the parable of the sower is about farming, or the parable of the good shepherd is about animal husbandry, or even the beloved parable of the prodigal son is about parenting. If commenters and scholars don't take the other parables of Jesus literally, why are some of them trying to interpret the parable of the talents literally?

The answer seems to have something to do with money. Money is one of tricky subjects folks don't want to talk about, lest we seem too needy or greedy. But what if this isn't a parable about money? What if money is just a tool in this parable, like seeds in the parable of the sower, or sheep in the parable of the good shepherd, or property in the parable of the prodigal son? Yet money can be so distracting, it can be hard to turn our attention away from it.

So, to help us make that transition, here is a real-life story about how money and the increase of money factored into spiritual growth.

When I went to seminary I had exactly \$500.18 in my checking account. I had no savings account, as I had spent most of the little amount of money I'd been able to save just to get to seminary. You might think that process would not cost a thing; but I needed to pay for things like additional physical and psychological examinations, entrance tests, travel expenses to meet with commissions on ministry, visit seminaries, and purchase whatever furnishings I needed for my apartment in seminary. As any ordained minister can tell you, seminary itself is not cheap. And I did not have the money to pay for tuition, books, meals, rent, and other expenses.

When visiting seminaries, I was honest about my lack of money. One seminary told me they had no money to help me, so I'd have to do additional work raising funds myself. Another seminary never got back to me. However, the financial administrator at Nashotah House said that was nothing whatsoever to worry about. He said I was doing what God was calling me to do, and that meant the money was just a detail that would work itself out. While this response does not sound financially wise, and lacks common sense, it was the only response that sounded like faith to me.

So I started at Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary with only \$500 to my name, some furniture, dishes, a car I hadn't finished paying for, my clothes, a new cassock, my two cats, a brand new prayer book hymnal, and no idea how this would work out. Less than three months into my first year, I discovered the windows in my small, ancient apartment didn't fit and to help keep the cost of utilities down, I ordered insulated curtains for the windows. Even though I found them on sale, the curtains, with shipping, cost exactly \$588.76. For those of you keeping track, that was \$88.58 more than I had. While some might interpret this as meaning God really didn't want me in seminary, my parents were kind and generous and gave me the additional money for the curtains. A few weeks later I was talking with the financial administrator of the seminary and he asked how I liked living in my apartment, and I told him I liked it fine except for the windows, and explained about the curtains, and what a help they were. He said those curtains were Nashotah's responsibility, not mine, and told me he'd reimburse me for them, which he did.

That was the only conversation I had with anyone in seminary about money until I graduated three years later, when the new assistant administrator of finances called me into his office demanding an explanation of my account. You see, there was something very unusual about my account. After three years of seminary, my account had just over \$10,000 in it. Most of my colleagues, he explained, had negative balances, some of them even owed over \$90,000 to the seminary, and here I was with more money than when I'd started, and he wanted to know why.

My answer was something he wasn't expecting to hear. I said it was there because God knew I needed that money. Unlike most of my colleagues, my bishop did not have a parish to place me in, so I was in the vulnerable position of being a recent seminary graduate and newly ordained priest having to find a parish in a new diocese on my own. That was a process that was going to cost money, and that is why that money was there. To me, that money was hope and joy. I hadn't asked for it, nor filled out grant applications for it. All I had done for the past three years, was faithfully fulfill the requirements for the process for graduation and ordination that had been my focus, just as I had been advised to do three years before.

To be clear, to me, that money was a gift and a miracle because it was God at work, but it was not like Jesus turning water into wine or multiplying the loaves and fishes. That money was there because every year I filled out the required FAFSA forms on-line and while at seminary I had two on campus jobs as chapel scholar and assistant at the seminary book store. Obviously, that wasn't enough to pay for three years of seminary and have extra money left over. Which means people who love and support me gave money to Nashotah House to deposit into my account. And how long did that \$10,000 last? As long as I needed it to. It gave me time to write and send

my resume and cover letters, to search open positions, to buy food, to pay rent, to go to a movie every now and then, hike on beautiful days and swim on hot summer days, to travel when I needed to. It gave me the time it took to care for myself and do what I had to do until a parish called me to serve as their rector.

During that time, I was not idle; I did not put that money into a savings account, nor did I invest it in financial schemes that might have produced hundreds of thousands of dollars. I couldn't do that, because I needed it. Instead, I invested it in my calling, my journey, and I grew. I learned that bishops are not the same as God, and I learned people's fears or prejudices, or lack of vision won't stop God or those of us trying to live into God's call. And I learned the Kingdom of God can manifest itself in the darndest ways. So, while the money left in my account did not double, something in me did. The money was just a tool that enabled that growth to happen.

And that is what I think is so easy to miss in Jesus' parable about the talents from Matthew's Gospel today. As I said before, this parable has been troubling people for ages, probably because it is full of distractions and some details have been lost over the years. When I was studying this parable, I learned a lot about talents, and the way wealth was interpreted in Jesus' day. If you imagine this parable started with the man dolling golden coins out of a velvet bag, then you missed something. You see, a talent was the equivalent of 15 years of work, and no one single coin could come near to representing such an extreme amount. A talent wasn't a coin. It was a hunk of metal like silver weighing at least 75 pounds. Some sources said a talent could weigh anywhere from 75 to 96 pounds, others say a talent could weigh up to 135 pounds. A talent was so big and heavy, it even had a handle.

This might change the imagery of the parable a bit; it could look almost comical as the man heaved these big chunks of metal to his slaves. I can't imagine such things would be easy to deal with. Such imagery could indicate extravagant generosity, or it could be a burden, which is certainly how the third slave interpreted the talent he was given.

Historians and scholars also had some pretty interesting things to say about the economy of wealth in Jesus' day. This was not a capitalist culture, to the people of the time and place, wealth was not available to everyone, in fact it was the opposite. To them, wealth was acquired at the expense of others, usually the poor, so a person who acquired more or new wealth was viewed as a thief, or extortionist. These historians say it was not uncommon for the wealthy to give large amounts of money to their slaves in order for the slaves to make money because slaves already had poor reputations and that way the wealthy persons would not suffer a loss of their reputation if more money was acquired.

In light of this information, this parable of Jesus is interpreted by some as the man and the first two slaves as being bad guys, because they engaged in an unjust system, which made the last slave a sort of brave hero for refusing to participate. These folks are quick to point out in Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells this parable shortly before his arrest and trial, and will himself be cast into outer darkness where he will suffer crucifixion. While I can see this interpretation might give comfort for such a difficult parable by making Jesus the hero we might want right now, I don't buy it.

I don't buy it because of the conversation between that last slave and the master upon his return. If the man is a stand in for the Roman Empire, Jesus never spoke against the Roman Empire like the slave did. Jesus always pointed folks back to God and how things could be. The slave expressed words of fear, judgment against the master and it sounds to me like he blamed the master for giving him the talent in the first place. This is not how Jesus talked. It is, however, how Adam talked, back in the garden, after God showed up and asked where Adam and Eve were when they failed to show for their evening walk with God.

We can't use this parable to do what Adam did because I don't believe this is a parable about doubling investments, I believe this is a parable about judgement. Specifically, the Last Judgement, the one where we will all one day meet our Maker face to face and will have to give an account of our lives. I also believe we won't be alone when we face our Maker, Christ who is something better than a hero, who is our Savior will stand beside us, and won't spare us from facing God, but will be with us.

This is not something we Christians, especially Episcopalians talk a lot about, as we'd probably rather not think about it. But here we are, coming to the end of the Church year, and find ourselves near the end of Matthew's Gospel where this parable was perhaps a message to the faithful about having the courage to live in faith because the coming of Christ is not just a restoration of the world to the way God dreamed, it is also the time when all people will meet their Maker. This judgment is both the end of the way things are and the start of something new. Perhaps we don't want to talk about the judgment because we've read too many books about it being a time of horrible things happening and most horrible of all is God's wrath unleashed. Yet if we look at Jesus' parable, for two of the slaves, the experience of Judgment was not horrible, it was joyful. Can we imagine meeting our Maker as a joyful experience? To share with God all the adventures of our lives, the things that worked, the things that didn't, to say, "Ha! I knew that was you!" at points in our lives where we felt God's Presence. Can you imagine that?

Perhaps it is challenging to imagine because we may have heard from too many people who claim they know God as the last slave said he knew the master as cruel, greedy, and took that which did not belong to him. Folks like that might tell us God gives people they love cancer or some other horrible affliction and is a taker of life instead of a giver of life, as Jesus showed us. In an understandable expression of grief and despair, they perhaps find comfort in blaming God for their loss instead of facing a hard loss. And while that may be how some people feel, perhaps such emotions cloud the ability to see God. Maybe part of the problem for the third slave was he judged his master in order to avoid his master's judgment of him because he had lived a life of fear, not joy.

And maybe that is the real challenging part of today's parable: to re-imagine the judgment of God, to let go of the way art, novels or movies try to show a God of wrath in order to keep us locked into a life of fear, and move into a life of joy. Such a life isn't without loss or disappointment or suffering, but when we realize Christ who suffered all that and more is beside us, that God is present, and our lives can be expressions of God's love then there is joy because joy is that connection to God.

Alexander Schmemmann wrote, "I think God will forgive everything except lack of joy; when we forget that God created the world and saved it. Joy is not one of the 'components' of Christianity, it's the tonality of Christianity that penetrates everything – faith and vision. Where there is no joy, Christianity becomes fear and therefore torture." Bishop Matthew Gunter adds to this a caution to beware of "Christianity that sounds and looks like it is rooted in fear, for it is false Christianity." I know it is hard to be joyful when it seems so much of life is unjust, when there is loss or struggle or suffering. But let's remember joy isn't bouncy happiness, it is that connection with God. It is persevering through, which is perhaps how to show God's love to a world trying to broker fear.

As we near the end of another Church year, perhaps it is a good time to prayerfully consider where we see God, especially in all we have been given, to ask if we see what God has given us to be gifts or burdens, to refuse to live a life of fear, and to rejoice always in the love of God, so we will know as revealed in Jesus, even especially at the Last Day.