

Imagine a group of fashion models, beautiful, poised, well-dressed, and self-confident. For some reason, they find a copy of the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen and, reminded of their childhoods, they take turns reading the stories out loud to one another.

One of them turns to the story “The Emperor’s New Clothes” and begins reading:

Many years ago there was an Emperor so exceedingly fond of new clothes that he spent all his time and money on being well dressed. Fashion was his number one priority; he loved commissioning new designs and showing off his latest custom-made outfits in front of the royal court.

One day, two swindlers came to the emperor’s city. They let it be known they were weavers, and they said they could weave the most magnificent fabrics imaginable. So great was their skill, they claimed, that they had recently stumbled upon the most magical cloth, so brilliant that it could only be seen by those with impeccable fashion sense. The magic of the cloth was such that it revealed those who were dull and unfashionable, so that to them the cloth appeared invisible.

The rumours of these great artists spread across the city until they reached the palace. And the Emperor paid the two swindlers a large sum of money to start work at once. They brought their looms to the castle and began to weave. Of course they were just pretending to weave. All the finest silk and the purest gold thread which they demanded went into their traveling bags, while they worked the empty looms all night long.

As they worked, the Emperor sent in various court officials, one at a time, to check the progress of the weavers. Each official came back with a glowing report: “I’ve never seen anything like it!” “The colours are beyond description!” “You’re going to love these designs!” For though there was nothing to see, each of them assumed the others could see this magical cloth, and so they pretended to see as well.

Finally, it was time for the Emperor to try on his new clothes. “Here you are, sir,” said one of the swindlers, holding out his empty arm. “The finest trousers and shirt, and a cloak with a train as long as your wisdom. The fabric is inspired by the goodness of your reign, bold and beautiful and immeasurably light. It will feel as comfortable as if you were wearing nothing at all.”

Of course the Emperor saw nothing, and his aides saw nothing as well, for there was nothing to see. Yet each was unwilling to admit their ignorance and lack of appreciation for modern style. So, with as much grace as they could muster, they fawned over the empty hangers, and stroked the air as they helped the emperor try on the imagined pants and shirt and cloak.

“Brilliant, Your Majesty!” proclaimed the swindlers. “You must share this treasure with the common folk of the city!” “A royal procession!” suggested the Emperor’s Minister of Public Affairs, “Everyone will want to see this!”

And so the announcements were made, and the crowds gathered along the route. As the doors to the castle were opened, the noblemen who were to carry the long train of the Emperor’s new cloak stooped low and reached for the floor, and pretended to lift and hold it high

So off went the Emperor, almost naked, into the streets with his head held high. Everyone in the streets and the windows said, “Oh, how fine are the Emperor’s new clothes! Don’t they fit him to perfection? And see his long train!” For they had heard of the magical properties of the cloth, and nobody would confess that she couldn’t see anything.

Until a small, high voice rang out. “But he hasn’t got anything on,” a little child said. And she began to giggle: “The Emperor doesn’t have anything on.” The giggles were contagious. “He hasn’t anything on.” The whispers spread, and more and more people joined in, until the whole crowd was pointing and laughing. “He hasn’t anything on!”

The Emperor shivered, for he suspected they were right. But he thought, “This procession has got to go on.” So he walked more proudly than ever, as his noblemen held high the train that wasn’t there at all.

As the fashion models finished the story, they closed the book and nodded at each other in appreciation. “What courage,” they said to one another. “What poise. So exposed yet invulnerable.” “That’s the moral of the story,” the reader said, “It does not matter what the critics say, the true model walks proudly even though he hasn’t anything on.”

That is the moral of the story, isn’t it? The emperor is the hero, the only one with enough courage to put on the magical clothes, immune to the laughter of the crowd.

No? That's not what your mother goose taught you?

Of course not. This is a story about the foolishness of pride, how going along with the crowd will ultimately expose your ignorance. The Emperor is not the hero but the goat, a fool blinded by his ego and the hero is the little girl who is the only one willing to speak the truth. That's the traditional understanding of the story, and the more obvious point.

But from the perspective of the fashion models, can you see how they might mistake the Emperor for the hero? They've walked in those shoes, in front of the unforgiving lights and harsh critics. Their careers and livelihoods are invested in the fashion industry. They value confidence and beauty and poise. So it would be easy for them to impose their values onto this story that is actually intended to critique those values.

The place that the hearer comes from has a huge impact on how the story is heard and understood. And the moral they imposed on the story isn't completely false: courage and poise are very good, honorable values. But that's not the point of the story.

I don't mean to criticize the fashion industry. (stay fierce, Tyra!) What I'm suggesting is that sometimes we do the same thing as readers of the Bible. We hear and read with our own values in mind, so that instead of allowing the Bible to challenge those values we impose a meaning that endorses and supports what we already think.

We don't mean to, most of the time, but it happens. We're all biased in different directions, and those biases skew how we understand the text.

Today I'd like to look at one particular story from Jesus that I think has been entirely changed by our modern bias. The Parable of the Talents. Most of you know this story told by Jesus very well.

From Matthew chapter 25.

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two

more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, '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.'

But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.'

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

So what's the moral of the story? I'm sure you've heard, as I have, over and over again that the lesson is that we are to be like the first two servants, to use our talents wisely, to invest our gifts and work and money in the service of God's Kingdom.

We have been given much, and so we if we work to prove ourselves responsible, God will bless us with more. And we definitely do not be like that lazy and fearful and shameful third servant, lest we, too, deserve to be cast out.

Work hard and invest wisely, serve God by multiplying whatever gifts you've been given. That's the moral of the story. Right?

But what if it isn't?

Let's hear the story again.

For it is as if a man, going on a journey,

Note what is missing from that phrase. When Jesus told a story, many times he began with something like, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like this." Some English translations even add that line to this story. But the Greek text doesn't actually say that. The story starts with a single word, "hO-sper," "Even as." a man going on a journey.

The story before this one begins "The Kingdom of Heaven will be like 10 bridesmaids" and goes on to describe 5 faithful and 5 unfaithful bridesmaids. But this parable does not say it's about "The Kingdom of Heaven." It doesn't mean that it's not, but it's worth noting that Jesus doesn't actually give it that title.

That's important, because most Kingdom stories the main character is God. Most people assume that here as well, that Jesus or God is the role of the master and we are the servants. And that image works fairly well for the theology of some Christians--that God sets up the world, then hands over control to humans and goes away. And someday God will return for an accounting of how we've managed God's property.

While that's a common view, remember that this story is being spoken by Jesus, Immanuel, God-With-Us. Whose primary message was "The Kingdom of God is at hand," that God is not absent but actually among us. Jesus' life was about challenging the "absentee landlord" view of God. The Kingdom wasn't about God's absence, but about learning to see God's Presence in the here and now.

So let's be careful with the assumption that the master is God in the story--Jesus doesn't say that it is, and the master role doesn't fit with who God is.

Further, "the absentee landlord" that Jesus describes was a character that Jesus' audience was already familiar with. The economy of Judah and Galilee was dominated by men who controlled large plots of land. And much of the management was done by the proxy control of their servant taskmasters (such as Jesus' parable of the Shrewd Manager in Luke 16). The

Parable of the Talents describes the economic hierarchy of Jesus' day, with an owner served by managers who oversaw the work of other servants and received their payments. The followers that Jesus was speaking with would have been familiar with this scenario, and almost all of them were on the bottom of the hierarchy.

So when we picture a benevolent God as a kindly master handing out gifts, Jesus' hearers would have heard a harshly common reality. They would have seen an elite master making arrangements for the overseers to maximize profits while he's visiting his other holdings. And they would have recognized that all of this wealth came at the expense of the common workers.

That's another piece of the story that we overlook, the size of the finances being handled. The master gives to the first servant control over 5 talents, to the second 2, and to another 1. A talent was equivalent to 15 years wages for a common worker. 5 talents was 75 years of labor. This was a fortune. Let's call it a million dollars in today's money. (A "small loan," you might say. ;). So one worker gets a million dollars, another \$400,000, and the third \$200,000. That's not a transaction that would have been carried out casually on the steps with small pouches of coins.

These amounts are absurdly large to Jesus' audience. This isn't a story about them, it's a story about the incredible wealth being traded by their superiors. 75 years worth of labor, controlled by one man? This is a story about the elites.

Even more absurd are the rates of return on the investments in the story. The master goes away on a journey, the story doesn't say how long. It seems that it's not just a casual trip, if he's giving that much control to his servants. Let's say his journey is two years long. For the first and second servant double their investments, that's an interest rate of 41%. If it's longer, say a 5 year journey, that's about 15%. Even if we're generous and say he's gone for 10 years, that's a 7.2% annual return--which is pretty good even by modern standards.

So the question is, how would these servants have generated such marvelous returns?

In the ancient reality, there were people who generated that kind of income on their investments. Zaccheus was one, the tax collector who was hated by the commoners for his collusion with Rome and his corruption. Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, how Jesus convinced Zacchaeus to turn away from corruption and return money to

those he had cheated. (Incidentally, in Luke's Gospel, the story that follows Zaccheaus just happens to be, The Parable of the Talents).

Those who generated those kinds of profits were those who took advantage of the system--tax collectors, money-changers in the Temple, those who colluded with the Roman empire, those who manipulated the food supply.

Profit came almost exclusively at the expense of the poor. After all, the Torah law forbade charging interest to fellow Jews entirely. We see investing and good interest returns as a badge of honor. But what Jesus was pointing to these servants as disobeying the Law of God, using the poor to grow their master's wealth and to improve their own positions?

And that brings us to the much reviled third servant. What a disgrace, to take what he's been given and hide it. The story says that he buried the talent because he was afraid, but there's some tension between what he says and what he does. For he knows that the master is harsh, reaping what he has not sown. He knew that the master expected the kinds of returns that he got from the first two servants.

And yet, he buried the talent in the ground, and he came back to the master to tell him what he had done. That takes guts. Could it be that what the servant feared most was not what the master might do to him, but the harshness that the master enacted on others? Perhaps his fear was a fear of God, an unwillingness to break the Laws against usury and profiting by taking advantage of the poor?

Ched Myers suggests that the third servant committed an intentional act of resistance. By having this third servant "bury his money in the ground," Jesus is giving a hat-tip in the direction of the agricultural workers who would have been listening. Only a commoner would get his hands dirty in the ground, so the third servant's act stood in solidarity with the common workers. The third servant knows the master reaps where he has not sown, but the third servant "plants" the treasure anyway. Rather than selling out his people, he stands with them.

What we do with the third servant has the potential to flip the whole story on its head. What if he's actually the protagonist of the story, the whistleblower, like the girl who cries out that "the

Emperor hasn't got anything on?" That would make this a story of revolution, a call to resist the Empire, to stand with the poor against the oppression of their masters.

That's a big stretch for some people. It's easier to hear this as an affirmation of our values of hard work and sound investment strategy. But stick with me. Jesus isn't finished yet.

So when the master returns, of course he is pleased with the first and second servants. They've generated the return that he was looking for, no qualms or questions asked about where and how the money came. And they receive more power, more control. Not for themselves, but for the joy of their master.

And the third servant, well, the third servant pays the price for resisting the master. His character is attacked: "You wicked and lazy slave!" His intelligence is questioned: "You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers..."

(Incidentally, the Greek word translated here as "bankers" is the same word used a couple of chapters before for the "money changers" that Jesus flipped out on at the Temple...)

And because this servant refused even to profit from the money changers, he is of no value to the master. "Take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents."

For, *"To all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

Most of us were taught that this was an image of Judgment Day, when each of us will stand before God and be judged on our works. "Well done, good and faithful servant!" That's a pretty powerful motivator. For me, for a long time, that was the goal of life--to someday hear God say "well done, my son." (Some quality material there for a therapist to explore my need to earn the approval of my parents...)

If that image provokes you to love and good deeds, that's great.

But that's not what's going on in this text. In the next story in Matthew 25, Jesus he gives a direct image of Judgment Day, and I'll get to that in a minute. But this story is an image of something else.

Think about it. Where else in the story of the People of God have we seen an image of a master demanding production from his slaves? Where else have we seen a slave stand up to that master, a confrontation between ruler and whistleblower, where the slave was sent away into the wilderness, cast out from the civilized world?

Once again, there are echoes of the Exodus story. When Pharaoh was displeased with the production of the Hebrew slaves, Moses stood up to him. And Moses was cast out into the wilderness. But instead of weeping and gnashing of teeth, what did Moses find? Holy Ground. The wilderness beyond the city is where Moses met God. Where God called the Children of Israel to leave their masters in Egypt. Where God showed them a new way of life, of the goodness and equality of Sabbath Economics.

The Parable of the Talents echoes that. Another image of Pharaoh, of the economics of greed and oppression, be that Egypt or Rome or the modern patterns of Empire.

So when the first two servants turn a profit, they are rewarded for growing the wealth of the Empire, rewarded with more power, more control. Because this is the mantra of the Empire: *"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."*

That is the very opposite of the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught about. It's the opposite of "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt 5). It's the opposite of "the last shall be first and the first shall be last" (Matt 20) It's the opposite of "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matt 16)

The Parable of the Talents is an image of the human Empire, and what happens to those who stand against it. Those who don't play by the rules of the Empire are cast out, into the wilderness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But remember the story of Moses--the wilderness was Holy Ground, the Presence of God.

Here's where Jesus flips the script entirely. Having shown what economic oppression looks like, now Jesus gives an image of the Judgment of God.

The next story of Matthew 25 is also familiar to us: a Good King, judging the "flock" of his people. And again, we have "good servants" and "bad servants," the sheep and the goats.

The shocker is the criteria for earning the King's approval. It's not about earning profit or generating income for the king, it's about generosity and mercy and kindness: For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ...

You know the punchline: "Whatever you have done to the least of these, you have done unto me."

The contrast between this story and the Talents story is earth-shattering. With the Empire, you have Pharaoh at the top, served by those who oppress those on the bottom, and those who resist are cast out.

But with the Kingdom ruled by Jesus, you have the King standing outside the system, standing with those who are crushed and oppressed, with the hungry and thirsty and immigrants and prisoners. That third servant, by being cast out, he's with Jesus, he's actually standing in the presence of God.

So that's a different way to read the Parable of the Talents. I don't know if you buy that or not. Personally, I find it quite compelling and consistent with the rest of Jesus' life and teachings. Remember, this story is headed to the cross. Jesus cast his lot with the sinners, the strangers, the poor. And the Empire killed him for it.

My point isn't that the conclusions we've typically drawn from the Parable of the Talents are wrong. Hard work is good. Using the gifts that God has given is good. We do need to be responsible with our surplus, and literally hiding it in the ground or letting fear keep us from contributing is not what God wants us to do with our gifts.

But sometimes I've seen this parable pulled out of its context and used like a motivational poster: work hard, or God will be displeased with you. As though God demands a return on God's gifts. As though Wealth and Power are symbols of God's blessing.

We need to be careful with those, because they confirm our biases as wealthy, powerful people in the world. And they downplay the true challenge of the parable, that God is with those who challenge the system, those who serve rather than dominate.

As Bruno pointed out last week, many of us are the owners, 1% who benefit from the system. We are the supportive servants, who earn a share of power and security because we contribute to the wealth of the Empire. Of course we read that hard work pays off and lazy people are cast out of the Kingdom, because that's how it works for us. We're glad to cast out the whistleblower, lest our complicity and nakedness be revealed.

I'm with you, I'm not eager to be exposed either. I'm a huge hypocrite to sit here and speak about standing with the oppressed when I'm living a life of comfort.

Lent is a reminder of our weakness and need for healing. It's an invitation to name our hypocrisy, our fear, our collusion, our anger or guilt or despair, to name those things and lay them down so that we might move further into God's healing and grace.

I want to close with a modern image of what that third servant might look like. One of the biggest walls we've bumped up against in this series on Faithful Finances is insecurity, our fear of what might happen to us if we let go of our wealth. Especially at the end of life--if we don't have money to take care of us when we needed, what then?

Elaine Enns and Ched Myers have a story about a friend of theirs whose life challenged the system, and what happened at the end of his life is beautiful.

(video clip from [From Mammon to Manna: Sabbath Economics and Community Investing](#))
Ched and Elaine tell about their friend who had devoted his life to serving people. Though he had no savings, when he learned at at 68 that he had pancreatic cancer, the community that he had cultivated came around him to support him. They created a hospice care environment to care for him until his death. Though he had no money, he had the love of a community and that was enough.