

Richard Jensen suggests that we might do well to retell not only the parable before us (the talents), but the cluster of three parables in this portion of Matthew: 24:45–51; 25:1–13; and 25:14–30, all of which have lords who assign tasks and, on returning, will expect an accounting. Although the interpretation we are suggesting might not work with that approach, given the contrast between the talents parable and the next one, we might think about combining a retelling of this week's text-segment with 25:31–46, depending on our focus for next week's sermon.

As for contemporary stories, we may need to consider all three of Thomas Long's helpful categories of illustration: analogy, example, and metaphor.¹⁹ Analogies help us to understand concepts. For instance, in the sample sermon included here, the story is told of discovery at a museum, about the "Nora Fragment." The analogy functions to help listeners appreciate the upside-down nature of the parable of the talents.

Since example stories help listeners to experience what we are preaching about, stories of economic injustice would always be appropriate. Timeliness may be the key here. Listening to National Public Radio or reading the newspaper so as to include contemporary examples will be helpful. Sermons whose examples are dated will lessen the rhetorical impact. While fortunate for our purposes, the world is unfortunately full of daily examples of economic injustice.

Analogies and examples are the norm in our sermons, the week-to-week fare on which we rely as preachers. But Long's third category—metaphor—is especially appealing when the text-segment is a parable, since metaphor, as he notes, is "the instrument of poets." Metaphor is "the rarest type of illustration, and in some ways riskiest, because it sacrifices precision and clarity for the sake of imagination and multiple meanings."²⁰ What might it mean, for example, to tell a story that does not provide an example of injustice but only wrestles with the complexities of life and leaves things unsettled?

Sermon Possibilities

While the possibilities are not endless, there are possible options for preachers to weigh:

- Using Our Financial Resources for God
- Resisting the Ways of the Empire's Economics

Sample Sermon: Parable of the Talents

David May first preached this sermon on April 17, 1991, as a chapel address at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Its challenge to a traditional interpretation of the "parable of the talents" caused quite a stir among some of the seminary's board members. It is offered here as an example of parabolic preaching.

"When Good Is Bad...and Bad Is Good" _____

A Sermon by David M. May

In the Mediterranean Sea, on the island of Sardinia, is a museum that contains a stone fragment on which are scrawled a few ancient letters. This venerated object is called the Nora Fragment and is believed to be the oldest example of a written script in existence. The fragment, which has been displayed for years, is admired by the public and studied by scholars. Recently, however, a scholar who was attempting to decipher the inscription jotted a note to the museum curator that said, "I don't want to be the one to embarrass anyone, but this fragment is displayed upside-down."²¹ For all the years it was displayed, the admiring public accepted the fragment as correct, and scholars had even attempted to interpret its enigmatic scrawl. Yet it was upside down.

Parables are in some sense fragments; they are just small parts of Jesus' teachings. They have been admired and studied, but my suspicion is that on some occasions they need to be turned upside-down. So despite years of preaching and teaching

on Matthew 25:14–30, what we call the parable of the talents,²² I want to take it and turn it upside-down and in the process maybe we will all see it or hear it right-side up.

Most of us are very familiar with the typical teaching and preaching on this parable. These talents, which were first-century monetary units, are spiritualized as gifts that the master, that is, God, gives to all of us. This parable is proclaimed, therefore, as a warning to all those individuals who are not adventuresome in risking their faith and who are not industrious enough with their gifts. Usually preachers as they close their sermon on this passage will say, “You need to use what you’ve got or you will lose it,” or, “Make an investment for God; risk it all for God.”

This is *an* interpretation that has become *the* interpretation. It is the popular interpretation for both the pew and pulpit because of the economic presuppositions that both have. We have been born and educated into a system of economics that rewards those who invest and gain. This parable is at the very heart of the Protestant work ethic. Our heroes and heroines today are those who make money and are good at it. We usually look down on someone who is not a good businessman or woman. Lest you think that I am only talking about something that infects the Wall Street crowd who deal with millions, I also am talking about the Wal-Mart gang who hustle daily through its doors. It’s the feeling one gets by saving \$1.50 because it’s double coupon day, *and* you have a rebate certificate of 50 cents, *and* the item is marked down because it’s last year’s model.

We assume the first listeners of this parable were like us and had our concerns about money and gaining and saving. We assume they were involved in a capitalist system like ours. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The original individuals who gathered around Jesus and heard this parable were peasants. This group had little to call its own and lived on only enough to survive from day to day. This lifestyle was not bad; it was just the way life was meant to be lived. The peasants assumed in their Mediterranean world of the first century that everything existed only in limited

quantity. There was only so much of anything to go around. If you gain and accumulate money or wealth, if you become a capitalist, you are doing it at the expense of someone else. This accumulation, in their view, was wrong.

Consider also this perplexing question related to the ones making money in this parable: Where else in the gospels does Jesus commend getting wealthy at the expense of others? Rather, constantly on the lips of Jesus are those hard sayings that we choose to ignore or soften. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man goes to Hades, and Lazarus to the bosom of Abraham. On another occasion, Jesus says to a rich young man, “Give *all* that you have and then, and only then, can you truly obtain the kingdom of God.” Then Jesus tells his disciples it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven.

In this parable, does Jesus reverse himself? Does he commend getting wealthy at the expense of others? If we turn this parable upside-down, perhaps our own outlook sees something new. Perhaps the focus falls not on the two servants whom we have always labeled as “good and trustworthy,” and in the passage are commended, but it actually falls on the last servant. It’s the last servant that we are to imitate!

Jesus often told parables and narratives in which the last element in the story is the one he commends. In the story of the soils and seeds, it is the last, rich soil that produces abundance, which is commended. In the parable of the Levite, priest, and Samaritan, it is the least likely and yet the last person we are pointed toward as our model. I invite you to consider in the parable of the talents that we are to place ourselves in the role of the *last* servant, who is a positive model for us, and not with the two who have been labeled as good and usually cited as our model.

Ask yourselves, Are those two servants really “good”? These servants are henchmen of the master. They throw in their lot with him. They go along with his schemes, and share his attitudes and philosophy. In the final assessment, they also share in his guilt of exploitation.

There are always those who attempt to make their lives easier by throwing in their lots with those who have the power.

While in Germany in 1976, I visited one of the few German concentration camps that have been preserved as memorials. It is called Dachau. During my visit, I saw the showers in which the Jews were herded and then gassed. I saw the ovens in which the bodies were then taken and cremated. Then I went to a building that housed numerous photographs taken during the concentration days of Dachau. Many of the photographs were enlarged so that the public could not miss the conditions that existed in this camp. In some of the pictures the faces of the Nazi guards had been scratched out. It was evident that someone had leaned over the handrail and out of anger mixed with anguish taken a pen or sharp instrument and defaced the face. However, I also noticed that once in a while a Jewish inmate in prison garb also had his face scratched out. I asked a guide why, and in scornful reply he stated, "Collaborators."

Collaborators, henchmen—those who go along to get along. Are we vulnerable at this level? Is lurking inside each of us the potential to be a collaborator with power? Could we or would we trade our integrity and honor for the price of a paycheck, a trip, an easier situation, a higher position—our lives? The first two servants, who are mistakenly labeled as "good," could see who held the strings of power and privilege, and, with unbounded energy, they went along with the master.

In contrast, the third servant did not go along. Instead, he did what was in Jewish tradition the most honorable action to follow. He took the talent given to him and buried it. This was the correct behavior. In his role, he was to care for, not endanger, what he had been entrusted. He was to be a steward, not an entrepreneur. The third servant does what is honorable, even in the face of great fear. Verse 24 records these words, and these are not words uttered in grandiose confidence but most likely with a hitch in the voice, downcast eyes, and quaking knees: "Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." Is this a portrait of God? Is this the God we gather each Sunday to

worship? No. However, it is a word picture in vivid colors of the world. It's a picture of power that demands and exploits those who cannot resist. The honorable servant finishes his speech before the all-powerful master by saying, "I knew you were a harsh man...[and I know that my fate is now inevitable so] here you have what is yours."

I discovered in my prowling through an old book store a beautiful first edition book by Karl Barth called *Credo*. It's a series of lectures he delivered in 1935 that were immediately translated into English in 1936. As I thumbed through the book, I turned to the dedication page and read these words:

1935!

TO THE MINISTERS

HANS ASMUSSEN, HERMANN HESSE, KARL IMMER,
MARTIN NIEMOLLER, HEINRICH VOGEL

In memory of all who

stood

stand

and will stand

In every age, generation, state, church, and denomination, calls come to face the masters. It is a call to stand against those individuals or groups who have the power to torment or even kill the flesh, but not the Spirit. It is in the face of that power to crush that we are evaluated as women and men of honor and integrity.

What does it mean to follow the honorable course? It may mean being labeled. Verse 30 indicates the third servant is labeled as "wicked and lazy." And so the labels have stuck as they have come down through the history of preaching. Somewhere this morning someone is castigating and vilifying that last poor servant. And perhaps we are all too ready without questioning to join others and label him, then dismiss him as useless. And when the label begins to stick, it is okay to see him as less than human—as someone who gets what he deserves.

Will the temporary pain of labels cause us to abandon the honor and Christlike way of life? The powerful masters are

out there, and they demand that servants do their bidding, to follow a course of action that may have very little to do with being Christian. To be honorable means to maintain integrity and continue in the *followship* of Christ. It will be difficult and painful because the masters have all the worldly power at their disposal.

When you stand as an honorable servant before the powerful masters and say, "I will not follow. I will not do what you ask. I will be honorable in Christlike action," you may be ostracized. You may be labeled. You may even lose your position.

I know that I am speaking this morning to the cream of the crop when it comes to honor and integrity. You are the honorable people of God, and you are seeking to do God's ministry. This message this morning, therefore, may not seem like good news. It may seem like just the opposite—bad news. However, it is Jesus' way of saying to the audience then and saying to us gathered here today, "Be realistic. When you follow me, when you stand against power, when you speak the truth, be prepared for the consequences."

As Jesus points out in this parable, the reward may be to be cast out into darkness where "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." But remember, we are never truly alone in the darkness. Nor are we the first to tread the path called honor. Jesus, an honorable servant who was labeled as wicked, was cast into "the darkness" of Golgotha, where there was the weeping of women and the gnashing of teeth of those on either side of him. Yet, he was not truly alone; God was with him. In the immediacy of our separation and exile, we may indeed cry out as Jesus did, "God, why have you forsaken me?" But wait, actively endure, because the hope of the Christian faith is the resurrection.

For everyone here who stood, stands, and will stand against the powerful—against exploiters, the power seekers, the power users—and for those of us who simply hang on long enough to do what is honorable, we will be vindicated by God. Amen.

CHAPTER 7

Matthew 28:1–10

Jesus Raised from the Dead

Locating the Sermon

Easter Sunday (Year A)

If ever there were a passage easy to locate, this is it. The climactic Sunday of the Christian year has arrived. The "Alleluias" absent during Lent are now rolled out in hymns and litanies. Our explorations in Matthew that began with Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus now bring us to his resurrection from the dead. As Dale Allison notes, chapter 28 is "the necessary ending to Matthew's story."¹ But while the resurrection (and later commissioning) are the end to Matthew's story, they are in many ways the beginning of the church's story.

Still, as central as resurrection is to the church's faith and very existence, it is ironically one of the harder passages to preach. Is there anything to say that has not been said before? Is repeating the grand story enough? Are apologetics in order? With what shall we help people to comprehend resurrection from the dead? What does Jesus' resurrection mean for us who are still alive? Preachers know stories about innocents slaughtered, temptation, those who hunger for righteousness, and oppressive economics; but how many of us have resurrection