

**November 15, 2020 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope**

**Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 , Psalm 90:1-8. 12**  
**Matthew 25:14-30**

[Leaning on ideas and quotes from Debie Thomas in this week's Journey with Jesus posted on 11/8/20 called The Good Kind of Worthless. Debie Thomas quoted Barbara Brown Taylor, and referenced the work of William Herzog (*Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, 1994) and Amy Jill Levine.]

**Let us pray.** May the words of my lips and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in your sight, O Holy God. Amen.

**Grace and peace beloved in Christ Jesus.**

**In the spring, as the lock down** grew long and when distance learning didn't have the intensity or structured time that it now does, our kids got into puzzles with a new passion.

It was fun to witness and had us scrambling to dig out puzzles or collect them from others.

Let's be honest, in a house already bursting with small things like Legos and doll clothes and paint brushes, keeping track of 100 or 300 or 500 more puzzle pieces has its challenges.

More than once you'd be trying to put together a section,

and the puzzle piece in your hand just didn't fit.

Maybe it belonged in a different box, I don't know, but it simply didn't fit.

**As I read and reread today's parable**, the parable of the talents, I've been musing about pieces that simply don't fit.

Most often we hear this parable around this time of the year.

Quite often we hear it with a stewardship focus.

Usually we take the liberty of consciously or not assigning certain roles in certain ways.

**In that classic read, it all starts off well and good and goes something like this.**

The master is God who entrusts the servants (that's us) with talents.

The talents could be anything from our wealth, to our abilities, to our gifts.

With this familiar spin, God (the master) expects us to use these talents wisely and thus produce more for God's glory.

This all sounds fine for the one who received the five talents and the one who received the two talents.

Indeed they multiplied their talents and have plenty to show.

**If I were preaching that sermon today**, I'd remind you of Gayle Bidne, our business manager who retired this spring after more than 10 years serving the congregation.

I'd describe the ways she cared for this ministry, the efforts and labors and love, the details, the relationships, her talents, all of them, multiplied by and for God.

**Or if I was preaching *that* sermon, I'd tell you what happened** in the chilly air early on Tuesday morning as a group of us gathered for a vigil outside the Bishop Whipple Federal Building where immigration proceedings are held.

On that cold morning Yesenia Morales Bahena from our congregation used her talents, her voice and power, her faith, to offer a heartfelt testimony.

She called for the reunification of 666 children (probably more) and their parents.

Most of these parents, it seems, have been deported, the kids are spread around the country.

The possibility of this reunification proves challenging in the best of circumstances,

and next to impossible with our broken immigration system, and COVID and a hurricane.

Think of the trauma, the terror, the devastating grief these kids and their parents face now and forever.

**That read of this parable works... until it doesn't.**

It gets tricky for the fellow who in fear buried his talent.

Words like worthless and wicked and lazy are brandished about.

I'm left cringing in an uncomfortable way.

Judgement is one thing, but these pieces just don't seem to fit.

**Is it that this just isn't how I expect God to act?**

Is it that I want to jump in and help this fellow out?

Is it that I'm afraid that's how I might have acted, hiding my talent, in a similar situation?

**This classic read of the parable**, the one that assumes God is the master, it never quite sits right with me.

To cover for that, I lean into the bounty of talents at the beginning,

and I ignore the harsh threats at the ending.

Sound familiar? I know this is a tough one for many of us.

**Barbara Brown Taylor writes,**

"How you hear a parable has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from."

To that end, Debie Thomas astutely asks a series of questions:

"If we're okay with descriptions of God that render God (even metaphorically) as a harsh and punitive slave master, then where exactly are we located, vis-à-vis the Gospel story?"

Who are we inadvertently erasing or harming for the sake of a tidy sermon series on tithes and offerings? What histories, legacies, and communities are we sidelining when we refuse to interrogate toxic representations of the Divine?"

**Remember that Matthew's gospel is grounded in the beatitudes.**

Blessed are the poor, the meek, those who mourn.

Blessed are the hungry, the merciful, the peacemakers.

So for Matthew God sides with the struggling, the little ones; God opts for justice, for mercy.

But here we are with today's gospel's classic reading, trying our best to fit the pieces together, and God appears to be a wealthy slave master.

Something doesn't fit.

We're looking for the kingdom of God in a story where those who have much get more, and those who have barely anything lose that, and then are threatened with God's wrath, to boot.

**So where do we go when the puzzle pieces just don't seem to fit?**

Two New Testament scholars Amy Jill Levine and William Herzog offer another way to see today's parable. They remind us that a "talent" in Jesus' time was an 80-130 pound mass of precious metals like gold or silver.

One talent would have been the wages of an average worker for 20 years, an incredible, staggering wealth,

made larger when it was loaned to poor farmers with interest rates between 60 and 200%.

When there was a drought, or the crops didn't yield, or someone became ill and couldn't work, the poor, the farmers, would be faced once again with foreclosing their land and lining up for day labor.

**The slaves in this story are actually the middlemen,** tasked with stewarding the master's wealth.

To do this they strategically negotiate with the farmers, making deals, skimming money all the while.

Their goal was to make money: money for themselves and money for the master.

Are terms like exploitation and payday lending ringing in your ears? They are in mine.

**So how does the third slave fit in?**

Maybe this slave finally says No, takes a stand against the greed and the gain by literally burying in the ground the heavy, bulky wealth, taking it out of circulation where it can't hurt anyone anymore.

He's been part of the system all along, but today he stands up, he risks everything and blows the whistle.

**We've always thought of this as a parable about the coming reign of God,**

but maybe it's as much about what faith can look like right now

as we extricate ourselves from the broken systems, the destructive ways.

Debie Thomas muses, maybe it's "a parable about speaking truth to power.

A parable about opting out of systems of oppression and exploitation — even and *especially* when we are accustomed to benefiting from such systems."

Maybe it's "a parable about interrupting 'business as usual' for the sake of justice and mercy.

A parable about turning reality upside down in the name of love."

Maybe, she continues, It's "a parable about saying, 'Enough is enough,' when it comes to the abuse and marginalization of the world's most vulnerable people.

A parable about the rejection, impoverishment, and loneliness we might suffer if we take seriously the call of God."

Maybe.

**Dear ones, this call of God is before us today.**

Will we dare let God stretch us and our thinking?

Will we find the pieces that fit, actually fit, who we know God to be?

Will we speak truth to power even when this means changing our patterns, our privilege?

**May God bless you in the intensity of these days.**

May Jesus hold you in this cusp of life and death.

And may the Holy Spirit sing through you with grace and love, always.

Amen.