

The 25th Sunday After Pentecost
Proper 28A: Matthew 25.14-30
The Rev. Scott Walters

This fall we've been making our way through the beautiful and bewildering parables of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. As we have, I've come to realize that, even if your favorite high school teacher assured you earnestly that there's no such thing as a bad question, it is possible to ask the wrong question of a text, parables very much included. This might illustrate what I mean.

Thanks to my kids, I follow an Instagram account called "Airplane Facts with Max." Pretty much every post is a version of the one from Friday, in which Max, a guy with shoulder length hair, wearing wire rimmed glasses and a concert t-shirt, looks into his phone and says:

"I'm an aircraft mechanic, and this is an airplane fact with Max. Today I'm in the forward cargo compartment of a Boeing 737. And next to me you can see the aircraft's main battery. But something that makes this battery different than the battering ram used by Grond in *The Lord of the Rings* that was named after Morgoth's war hammer and shaped like a giant wolf's head after the great werewolf Carcharoth who was the guardian of the gates of Angband which was Morgoth's fortress in the far north of Middle Earth during the first age that was forged by the smiths of Barad-Dur and then drawn across the battlefield during the siege of Mines Tirith and in four mighty strokes was able to break asunder the great gate of Mines Tirith is that this is a 24 volt nickel cadmium battery and will probably never be used to aid the forces of Mordor in the destruction of Mines Tirith but I still think this battery is pretty cool. So. Yep."

Sorry. Obviously part of the schtick is that Max goes on just a little too long about *The Lord of the Rings*, which may be familiar if you know a hard core Tolkien fan. The good news is you don't need to find Max as amusing as I do for this to be a useful sermon illustration. Because, if you are reading *The Lord of the Rings*, the experience will not be improved if an airplane mechanic is looking over your shoulder and explaining that basic aeronautical engineering will tell you that the flying steeds of Nazgul couldn't possibly fly. It's just as true that you wouldn't want J.R.R. Tolkien to be the one servicing the next airplane you board. If you're repairing an airplane, your questions should be bound by the laws of physics and aerodynamics. And if you're going to glean any wisdom or wonder from *The Lord of the Rings*, your questions of the text will need to accept Middle Earth as Tolkien imagined it, not according to what's plausible in the Earth we inhabit.

Similarly, if Jesus tells a parable that involves slaves or kings, this does not mean that Jesus endorses slavery and monarchy. He's just using characters from the world he inhabits to teach us something that's probably true deeper down. Almost always the teaching will ring true in worlds as different as Mordor and first century Palestine and 21st century Memphis.

There's another thing to say before we take up the parable of the talents. When the Bible is the text we're reading, we need to remember that it's actually 66 books (at least), and that those books contain poems and prophecies and letters and parables and songs and legends and competing, even contradictory versions of the very same historical events. We need to know what kind of story we're in before we begin to make sense of it. And part of that sense making project may also be having a hunch about what the overarching story is in which the particular ones all somehow play their part.

Here's a quick sketch of the Christian good news as I understand it. In the beginning all that God creates is declared good and exists as a gratuitous gift. Things go awry when, instead of

living in the abundance that is given us, we decide to reach out and grasp something more for ourselves. As a result, relationships break down. Humans from God, man from woman, people from the earth and from our own bodies, sibling from sibling. Shame and fear and scarcity and blame enter in. And God, who used to stroll with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening, is searching them out and calling their names while they hide. Ever since, we've been caught in a world that is both beautiful and broken. And the project for Jews and Christians alike has been to find the abundant life we were created for, rather than live lives of estrangement, grasping the little we've taken for ourselves, seeing our neighbors as competitors and threats instead of gifts.

So the Hebrews would bring the first fruits of their harvest, a tenth, and offer it back to God and the community as a thank offering. As a reminder that, however much effort and skill they put into farming, the fruitfulness of the earth was the gift of God. Later on, a rabbi named Jesus would say things like we gain our lives by losing them. He'd tell us to give with no expectation of return, to forgive even those we count as enemies, and to stop participating in the age old return of violence for violence. And that age old cycle was ruptured completely in his death and resurrection, when, after this violent world visited its worst upon him, he returned not more violence, but forgiveness, love, even redemption from this sinful world and its ways.

You and I come to this table to receive that body in which the violence ceased, asking God to fill us with the spirit of Jesus. To give us lives fired by gift and grace, not scarcity and shame and fear. At least that's why I come with you to this table week after week, with these empty, open hands of ours.

So the parable. I haven't forgotten about it. If the broader Christian story is anything like what I've just described, what questions should we ask of this story?

Well, by the time we get to the end of the parable, we're probably taken aback by the teeth gnashing bit and may even wonder whether God is like that harsh master who will throw us into the outer darkness if we don't use our talents well. But I think that's the wrong question. When we begin with the conviction that God is the one who calls to us in the garden, or the good shepherd who takes off after us when we stray, and if we believe the kingdom of God is a realm of gift and grace, not scarcity and fear, we might pause before assigning every characteristic of the master in the parable to God. And in that pause we may notice that fear of the master is what caused the man to bury his talent in the ground. Fear is the problem here, not the point.

So what are the right questions, if we believe this story is ultimately about the good news of grace? Well, when we get past our obsession with divine judgement, we may also see that this master doesn't count like we do. He passes out talents one or two or five at a time. But one must be enough, because he doesn't seem to give a rip about how many anyone possesses. All he cares about is that our talents be passed back into the world. Invest them or trade them or do anything with what you've been given other than hang on to it in fear and desperation. This isn't how God created us to live.

Which means, I think, we're still very much in the very first story, aren't we? We still live in a world that tells us we need to hold tight to what we've got once we've gotten it. A world that turns us away from the truth that our lives are gifts that only come fully to life as we give them away. And a world whose troubles still stem from our fearful grasping, clinging to what we think is rightfully ours to hang onto.

The result? Well, read the news. Read the news about the place where Jesus lived, or the news about the desperate places in Memphis. Or simply remember the broken relationships we've known in our own small lives. An outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth is a mild metaphor for what humans create at our fearful worst, don't you think?

But we're here ... and mean you and I are quite literally here, in this room, trying to let an old parable and maybe an even older creation account shape our lives today, because we still believe Jesus when he tells us that there is another way to live, even in this broken world. Our questions and our prayers and our actions need to be grounded in the realm of God that Jesus told us to watch for and to trust, not the grim and grasping one we think we have to settle for.

To that end, I will leave you with a prayer. It's a prayer of Walter Brueggemann's that we adapted for a vestry retreat a few years ago. It's a prayer that we turn from our talent burying ways toward the abundance Jesus promised is still possible.

Loving God, you have set us in families and clans, in cities and neighborhoods. Our common life began in a garden, but our destiny lies in the city. You have placed us in Memphis. This is our home.

Your creativity is on display here through the work of human hearts and hands. We pray for Memphis today—for North, South, and East Memphis, for Orange Mound and Cooper Young, for Berclair and Central Gardens, Frayser and Evergreen and Raleigh. We pray for our poorest neighbors and for powerful people in banks and offices downtown. We pray for people from Boxtown and for the new urbanites. We pray for Memphis's sisters: Germantown, and Bartlett, and West Memphis, and Millington, and Olive Branch, and Southaven, and others. And for Nashville and Jackson, Jerusalem and Nairobi, Shanghai and Port-au-Prince—and a thousand other cities connected to our own.

In all our neighborhoods this day there will be crime and violence and callous moneymaking; there will be powerful people unable or unwilling to see the vulnerable who are their neighbors. There will also be beautiful acts of compassion and creativity in all these places—forgiveness and generosity; neighbors working together for a more just community.

Help us see this place as something other than a battleground between us and them, where our imaginations are limited by win/lose propositions and endless rivalry. Show us a deeper reality, God: Show us your playground, and invite us to play. Like the city of your dreams, make this a city where those who were once poor enjoy the fruits of their labor; A place where children are no longer doomed to misfortune, but play safely in the streets under the watchful eyes of healthy old men and women; A place where former rivals and natural enemies work and play together in peace; And where all people enjoy communion with you. We pray in the name of the one who wept over the city. Amen.