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In addition to preaching the Gospel this morning, I have another task. Talking to you about our Annual Giving Campaign and why you should make an annual pledge to this faith community and its mission and ministry. Now, there are plenty of preachers out there who would say that it is a stroke of good luck that the Parable of the Talents just happened to be the assigned lectionary reading for this Sunday. Because it is quite possibly the text most used by modern Christians to talk about stewardship. It's just asking to be moralized into a lesson about taking what God gives you—money, time, talents and then investing them—without reservation and without fear of taking risks. And even better...if you invest in the Church and God's mission—an investment that will not only help the church, but will help grow your own spirituality as well.

I wish I could preach that sermon this morning. It sure would make my job a lot easier. But I can't...because I'm just not sure that's what God needs us to hear from that parable.

We have spent the last few weeks with parables a lot like this one about the talents—parables we are told that are all about end times and final judgment. Parables that seem to preach the Protestant ethic to be prepared, to be good stewards and investors, to work hard. And if we do those things, we'll be rewarded. And if we don't, we'll end up in some dark place where there's a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Over the past weeks, however, I have become more and more uneasy with that interpretation. It just doesn't seem to fit with the message of Jesus. Did Jesus really want us to see in this parable that God is represented by the angry landowner? A man who tosses out his slave into the outer darkness where he will spend eternity weeping and gnashing his teeth—all because he didn't invest his money properly?

That does not sound like the God that Jesus talks about at other times—at least to my ears. I was perplexed. So I pulled out this book by Amy-Jill Levine, called "Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi." I was introduced to this book a couple of years ago, and it has changed the way I understand the parables.<sup>i</sup>

In it, Amy-Jill Levine reminds us that the Gospel writers almost never try to *explain* the parables. They allow us to engage with them on our own. Parables were used in both the Old and New Testaments as mechanisms to shake things up—to disturb and make the audience rethink things they thought they already knew. When a parable seems to be saying something very different from the message that Jesus has been sharing, or seems to contradict the very way that Jesus has been acting and living, we should pay attention.

Let's admit it...this parable about the landowner leaving the slaves to invest the talents is disturbing. We would have to ignore the hard parts of it like the landowner/slave dynamic and the terrifying punishment at the end if we wanted to turn into a stewardship sermon—a morality lesson about why you should invest your time, talents, and treasure in the church.

So rather than try to tame this parable, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that we let it disturb us and get our attention, just the way it would have grabbed the attention of Jesus' audience.

But first, we have to understand it better.

There's a famous saying from biblical studies that goes: a text without a context is just a pretext for making it say anything one wants. If we want to even *begin* to understand what this parable is all about, we need to understand the context. How would this story have sounded to the Jewish listeners of the first century?

Richard Rohrbaugh, a professor of religion, argues that we cannot use our 21<sup>st</sup> century worldview to understand the parables of Jesus. Stories, like this one about masters leaving their property in the control of their slaves, was not uncommon in the ancient world. Rohrbaugh claims this maneuver was a strategy for increasing the personal wealth of the landowners without the shame of breaking the law. The Torah, or the law of the Hebrew scriptures, is clear that seeking interest is forbidden. So landowners would use their slaves to get around the prohibition against investing and interest. According to the norms of the time, what would have been shameful and dishonorable behavior for the landowner was okay for the slaves who had no honor to begin with in the ancient economic system.<sup>ii</sup>

The landowner in our parable today gave to his slaves an exorbitant amount of money. Each talent was worth something like 10 years of wages. And he intended for them to exploit the system in order to make even more money for him.

Rohrbaugh argues that the audience of Jesus would not have found the behavior of the slaves who doubled the investment to be acceptable or honorable. In the worldview of the ancient Mediterranean cultures, there was a limited amount of wealth available. If the wealth and goods have all been distributed already, to seek more, would mean that someone else gets less—it would be stealing from others. So the only honorable character in this parable would have been the third slave who buried safely what belonged to the landowner, planning to return exactly what had been entrusted to him.

If this is how Jesus' listeners would have perceived the behavior of the landowner and the slaves, what would they have thought about the end where the third slave was deemed wicked and lazy and cast out into the darkness? Would they have heard his punishment as God's judgment? Or would they have understood the shocking ending to be an uncovering of a cruel, economic system that allowed some to profit while others went without and punished those who resisted unfair practices by taking everything from them?

What if this parable is not a lesson about how we enter into the kingdom of God, what scores us points with God to be cashed in later, but instead is a ludicrous tale told by Jesus to point out the depravity of the economic system that Israel lived under? What if the hero is the third slave who hid the money rather than the other two who invested theirs and made extravagant wealth for their master who surely didn't need it?

Would that not make more sense in light of those things that Jesus showed time and again that he cared about? The poor and interdependence over personal gain—in other words, an economic system founded on the principles of justice not greed.

When biblical scholars like Amy-Jill Levine and Richard Rohrbaugh turn parables like this one on their heads and suggest a new way of understanding them, they offer us permission to read the parables less like answers and more like invitations. An invitation that is not limited to reimagining how the audience of Jesus may have heard the parables but allows us to imagine how they still speak to us today. And that's a critical part of our work as the church. Reading the word of God and breaking it open to reveal what it has to say for who we are today.

I thought it was important for us to hear that message this morning. But this rethinking of how we hear parables, and a reinterpretation of this particular parable about the talents, kind of wrecked my Annual Giving message. Because I do want you to invest your talents, your time, and yes, even your money in Christ Church.

The truth is, we spend money on the things we value. So the question is do we value the mission and ministry of this church? Do we believe that this church makes a difference in our lives and in the community that it serves, both inside and outside these walls? Do we believe that in a culture that is growing less and less interested in organized religion that there is still value in coming together to read the word of God—like the parable that we heard this morning—and breaking it open to hear what God is speaking to us? Do we believe that if we gather as a beloved community we can begin to create the world that God desires, here and now?

Let us pray,  
Abundant God, you made us in your image and breathed in us a spirit of generosity that is both gift and response. Move us, we pray, to give as we have received--abundantly, generously, and joyfully that our common ministry may ever bear witness to your unfailing grace. In the name of the Three in whom we are One,

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus* (New York: Harper One, 2014)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/bible-interpretation/what-does-the-parable-of-the-talents-mean/>