The Lord, The Lord God, Merciful and Gracious,

Longsuffering, and Abundant in Goodness and Truth

The Gospel of Matthew 25:14–30

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Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew:

14 ‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to
them; 15to one he gave five talents,* to another two, to another one, to each according to his
ability. Then he went away. 16The one who had received the five talents went off at once and
traded with them, and made five more talents. 17In the same way, the one who had the two talents
made two more talents. 18But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in
the ground and hid his master’s money. 19After a long time the master of those slaves came and
settled accounts with them. 20Then 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.” 21His 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.” 22And 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.” 23His 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.” 24Then 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; 25so I was afraid, and I went and hid
your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.” 26But 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? 27Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I
would have received what was my own with interest. 28So take the talent from him, and give it to
the one with the ten talents. 29For 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. 30As
for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and
gnashing of teeth.”

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Although I am sending this address from far away from Largs and prior to the time you hear the tones and rests, the consonants and vowels, and the tempo of my spoken voice, I do now

—on this day of your hearing—greet you from Southern California, from the city of San Diego, and thank you for inviting me to address you. I feel the weight of the task laid on me—of proclaiming to you the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. I *hope* you are pleased with what I say, but I *pray* that what I say will step out of the way of what God has to say to you here today. My words are at best a means of God's grace, i.e., an open place for the passage of the unpredictable movement of the Holy Spirit. May we all pray in this time of hearing, "Come, Holy Spirit!"

The passage for today lays out a very familiar parable of Jesus, "the parable of the talents." Let us hear it with *fresh* ears. Let us *lean into it* and let it speak as good news for the *poor*, as good news for the *losers* of the world, as good news for the *lost* and *lonely* and *afflicted* and *humiliated* and *abandoned* people that populate especially the edges of our profit-driven world.

What I have heard and ask you to hear in this parable is very different from what is ordinarily said to be its point, what you may well have come to believe it is saying. What I have come to believe, however, is that this ordinary interpretation of this parable is "*bad* news for the poor." So, I may be asking a lot of you in this sermon. Thank you for being patient with me.

The story in this parable, in brief, is of a wealthy and powerful absentee landlord who has tasked poor slaves with stewarding his money. It is important to remember that the word "talent" here had a very particular meaning at the time. It didn't mean what we call a talent. It in fact had nothing at all to do with aptitude, say, at the piano or on the stage or at a craft. It was rather a unit of measurement, more specifically here of a unit measurement of precious metal, and even more specifically, in the world controlled economically by the Roman Empire, a unit of money. It took

a very long time for anyone to earn a single talent in the first century, perhaps 15 years or more. Given the fact that the chief actor in the parable of the talents is a wealthy absentee landlord, that this translation uses both the words "bankers" and "money," and that the talk is all about profit, investment, and return, we may assume that talk of talents in this passage is talk of money.

Perhaps I should, for a moment, stop right there with a reminder that the New Testament has a very low opinion of money. It has a low opinion of *hoarded wealth*, certainly. We only need to remember the story of "the Rich Young Ruler" to see that, I think. But wealth is not the same thing as money. Wealth is constituted by such things as food, shelter, fields, wells, livestock, equipment, seed, forests, and time—time, say, to plant and harvest or to recover from injury or disease. Wealth might rise out of the labor of a grateful people, who handle it not as their private property, but as God's gift, a gift that never ceases to be God's, who handle it with generosity and hospitality, people who in turn give their wealth—to one another and to all they happen to meet . . . among them strangers. *Money*, on the other hand, carries power toward the acquisition of goods only because of a mechanism of enforcement, on what we might call the threat of state violence, and is at least one step removed from the goods that constitute actual wealth. Indeed money may well in fact stand in for indebtedness, the deep absence of wealth, money-that-must-be-paid-back, even if doing so depletes one's goods. Money never quite touches *actual* goods, even though in our world it is what we use to acquire them. That, I believe, is why we find the New Testament declaring that "the love of *money* [not wealth] is the root of all evil."

The parable of the talents is all about money. The master of his slaves *has* money and wants *more*. He has use for his slaves only insofar as they get him more money. Thus when he entrusts his three slaves with his talents, with his money, leaves them with time to make him

more, and then returns to see what they have for him, he is pleased with two of his slaves—the ones who have netted him more money—and rewards them. The third, however, out of fear has buried his master's coin, returns it to him with neither profit nor loss. He says to his master, "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."

It turns out in the story that the slave's fear of his master was well placed, but that this man of wealth was even more brutal than the slave had feared. This tyrant whose business practices involved theft—for he reaped and gathered the fruit of the seed and labor of others—could not see in the slave before him anything but a loser who had cost him good money. And so, the master's wrath pours out on his slave with a ferocity that we must decry: "So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to a*ll 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." Hear the word of this beast!

What is perhaps most disturbing about the history of the interpretation of this parable is that it is so often interpreted as an account of the way God judges the world, the way God rewards and punishes God's creatures, the way God determines who is fit for heaven and who is fit for hell. Of course, the details of the reward and punishment of this parable are sometimes spiritualized, as if it were a quality of life that one has *robbed oneself of*, perhaps in foolishly failing to promote in oneself what could have come to joyful personal spiritual fruition. Unfortunately, among the vast majority of peasants and slaves in first century Palestine, life was so desperately difficult, lived so close to starvation and death by "state violence," that this story

would never have sounded to them like a fable—Aesop's perhaps—with a moral. It would have stirred in hearers vivid memories of the widespread mistreatment of people they loved and of themselves at the hands of the tiny minority of the rich and powerful Romans and Roman collaborators who took from them, before it could sprout, every dream, every aspiration, every encouragement, every hope. These first hearers of Matthew's word would have had nowhere to turn, but to the God of miracle, of mercy, of grace, of a "Kingdom" that was coming, with good news—with justice—for them.

Is there, then, no way that the "master" of this parable could be shown to be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Well, clever interpreters have made clear over time that any text can be interpreted in a great variety often of convincing ways, some of them starkly opposed to others. It is easy to see that a good argument might be made that God is this parable's master, e.g., by those who think first of God as an abstract wielder of crushing power, rather than the loving Father who rushed weeping to embrace the crucified body of Jesus. However, there are hints in what follows this text that show that we might be wise not to imagine that we are to be like the "good and faithful" slaves of this parable, the *greatest* of the them, and we might be wise not to imagine that the *least* of them, the slave who buried his master's smaller fortune, has been treated the way the gospel would have him treated.

The parable that *follows* the one we are concerned with chiefly today is, if anything, even more famous. It is the parable of the sheep and the goats. I will not dwell on its details here, that is what Taryn is doing next week. However, I would like to draw our attention to what Jesus says over and over in it—and then apply that to the parable of the talents.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats Jesus distinguishes between two groups: *first*, the ones who care for and put their bodies into solidarity with those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison—and, *second*, the ones who do not care for them, do not put their bodies into solidarity with them.

In this parable Jesus declares that despite appearances he—*Jesus*—is not hard to find, that he dwells *among* his hearers—and we in the early 21st century might be so bold as to say that he dwells among *us still*. He dwells among them and us, he says, wherever people are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison. He says that *he* is "the least of these" and he *calls* "the least of these," "members of my *family*" (or more familiarly "my brothers"). "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (40). And, "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (45). Who *in* the parable of the *talents*, may I ask, was "the *least* of these"? Was it not the poor slave treated so brutally by his master? Was he not the *Jesus* of that parable? If we look for a *crucifixion* in the parable of the talents, do we not see it right where a tyrannical absentee landlord destroys the life of the one who already teetered on the crumbling cliff's edge of death and whose only crime was his failure to *increase* his owner's power to oppress?

If this is so, then, of course, we are not given an excuse for failing to steward our world or our spiritual lives or various other tangible or intangible nameable present or future goods. But nobody ever thought that there were excuses for such neglect, certainly not the desperately poor. Life is hard. We all know that. But life is so much harder, if there is no one there to come alongside us when we fail, when we are battered, when we are humiliated by the ruthless powers that seem to grow ever stronger in this present evil age. The gospel tells "the *least* of these" that

they are not alone and it tells them also—and the rest of us with them—that they and we, even in our weakness and defeat, are to turn to one another with a love that has our *bodies* attached to it, a love that *acts* right up *close*, that *embraces* and *lives* this *hard* life, not alone, but *entangled* in one vital social body.

Of course, we are—on both sides of the Atlantic—in the middle of an angry, deadly, isolating pandemic. Modern political and economic life had already done its best to isolate us from one another before COVID-19. But since late winter and early spring of this year, we have had to withdraw from one another even more, and for good reasons, hard reasons that save lives. In our quiet loneliness we know in our bones that we were not created to be alone; even introverts like me know that we were not created to be alone. A voice from deep inside us—or from far beyond us—cries that *we are not to be alone*! It will take a lot out of us to learn how we are in this time of danger to come alongside one another, to come alongside one another without being agents of death. How to love in a time of COVID-19 . . . requires that we humbly learn what we are not in ourselves ready to learn, what we must be taught in spite of ourselves, and perhaps there is nothing for and toward which we are more to pray than that we learn to love in a time of COVID-19. How might we so love? How might we no longer live alone?

It would be foolish for me to give you a "how-to" prescription for overcoming your isolation. It would be foolish for me to give such a thing to people in my own town, but I've never even stepped foot in yours. What I would like to do instead is place in your hands a passage from my favorite writer, one that speaks of what it is to be merciful to one another, when there is no way for our mercy to register on the radar screen even of the most perceptive of investigators. It tells us, I think, how we might do as Jesus has commanded us.

The context for this passage is yet another parable, this one from the gospel of Luke, perhaps the most famous of all the parables, the parable of the good Samaritan. The writer is Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish thinker, "a kind of poet," he calls himself. To make clear how subtle and important mercy is, he asks us to imagine the story of the good Samaritan differently. In the way it appears in Luke, of course, a traveler has been robbed and terribly injured by his attackers. He is ignored by a string of people whom one might expect to help him, including a priest. In the end, a member of an ethnic group despised by the people of the injured man cares for him, at significant personal cost, and makes sure that he will return to health. Kierkegaard asks us to imagine the story with no less mercy, but with different details. Here is what he says:

"Suppose that it was not one man who traveled from Jericho to Jerusalem, but there were two, and both of them were assaulted by robbers and maimed, and no traveler passed by. Suppose, then, that one of them did nothing but moan, while the other forgot and surmounted his own suffering in order to speak comforting, friendly words or, what involved great pain, dragged himself to some water in order to fetch the other a refreshing drink. Or suppose that they were both bereft of speech, but one of them in his silent prayer sighed to God and also for the other—was he then not merciful? If someone has cut off my hands, then I cannot play the zither, and if someone has cut off my feet, then I cannot dance, and if I lie crippled on the shore, then I cannot throw myself into the sea in order to rescue another person's life, and if I myself am lying

with a broken arm or leg, then I cannot plunge into the flames to save another's life—but I can still be merciful."

In this time when, for a great variety of reasons, not least of which is a deadly global pandemic—we do not know how to draw close to one another in love "as we ought," may the God of mercy who by the Holy Spirit raised the hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick, and imprisoned Jesus from the grave, send that same Spirit upon us in Largs and in San Diego to open a way before us by which we might perform works of mercy to one another. Amen!