

Matthew's parable of the talents is straightforward. And from our modern context, it's not an easy parable to read. Matthew is describing an institution of daily life in Jesus' time, using the reality of slavery to teach about what will happen to the disciple who does not use what has been given to them for building up and living within the kingdom of God.

The parable tells us about two slaves who were entrusted with much - one talent was worth about 15 years of a day labourer's wages. The first two slaves did something with what was given to them, presumably the slave owner knew their abilities and they were given responsibility with vast sums of money. They were able to increase the wealth of their master. In Roman society, managerial slaves that acted well for their slave owner could increase their upward mobility, though they still remained slaves. Only their master could free them.

The third slave, knowing his master to be a harsh man and was afraid of him, took the money and did what was a common practice then to keep it safe by burying it in the ground.

The first two slaves are rewarded. They enter into their master's good books, into his joy. But the third slave, who took no risks on his master's behalf, who points out that the master does not do the work from which he benefits, get called worthless and thrown into the outer darkness, understood to be prison, but Matthew adds an end times image so that the readers get the point: "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Professor of Religious Studies, Jennifer Glancy writes in her book "Slavery in Early Christianity":

The reward of faithful slaves in the Matthean parables - additional responsibility rather than freedom - was neither distinctive nor countercultural. In order to ensure smooth functioning of their households, masters relied on skillful slaves. In turn, as they undertook increasing responsibility, slaves sometimes amassed personal funds and even political influence. Such rewards were a strong positive incentive to fidelity. On the other hand, ever-present

threats of corporal punishment or sale into harsher slavery were even stronger incentives, driving slaves to work diligently on behalf of their owners' interests. ¹

Matthew is telling stories about the end time; about the fullness of time when God's judgement comes. In this parable, if it is straightforward, Jesus is the Master who returns and rewards those disciples that have acted on his behalf and condemns those disciples that have done little with what was given to them. It is a cautionary tale about what to expect if the early discipleship community does not live up to the demands of Jesus' message. ²

So we must ask, where is the gospel in this rhetoric of slavery? There have been all kinds of acrobatics to move us away from the Master who rewards and punishes slaves. We have heard different interpretations, such as being found in the joy of the master or on faithful stewardship of finances or of our gifts, those things we have been given.

How can we as followers of Jesus today, with a history and legacy of slavery and colonialism in North America continue using the rhetoric of slavery? How can we read and preach on it when we know that slavery is not a thing of the past but even more widespread with men, women and children all over the world remaining victims of modern slavery. "... Bought and sold in public markets, forced to marry against their will and provide labour under the guise of "marriage," forced to work inside clandestine factories on the promise of a salary that is often withheld, or on fishing boats where men and boys toil under the threat of violence. They are forced to work on construction sites, in stores, on farms, or in homes as maids. Labour extracted through force, coercion, or threats produces some of the food we eat, the clothes we wear, and the [soccer]balls we kick. The minerals that men, women, and children have been made to extract from mines find their way into cosmetics, electronics, and cars..." ³ In Jesus'

¹ Slavery in Early Christianity, Jennifer A. Glancy, Fortress Press, 2006, p. 118

² Ibid, p. 120

³ globalslaveryindex.org

time and now a slave is a person whose body does not belong to them and their sole function is to make their master or owners wealthy.

The Spanish rescue ship Open Arms patrols the waters of the Mediterranean off the coast of Libya for migrants. The sea has become a cemetery for men, women and children coming from Africa to the dreamed of bankable shores of Europe. Some are fleeing war, but most are escaping the grinding poverty of their homelands.

Open Arms rescued a capsized dinghy overloaded with over 100 migrants last week. Among those, six month old baby Joseph was lifted out of the water to an Italian hospital. The rescue workers pulled his mother from the water and through the posted video we can hear his mother's painful cries, "Where is my baby? I lost my baby. Where is my baby?"

His mother had made the perilous journey from Guinea to that watery cemetery. Her journey is heart-breaking. Dealing with human traffickers, desert, migrant camps, and the unpredictable waters of the Mediterranean, her dreams of a better life are shattered, the baby of her own body now buried in a foreign land. Bodies that are used, traded in and for profit. Bodies deemed valuable only for another's gain.

That mother's story might be far from our own, but the truth of the matter is that we all live embodied. Our bodies are the way we experience the world. Through our flesh, we know pleasure and joy, we know pain and sorrow. Thousands of times over in our lives we can feel at times strong and then vulnerable.

Jesus knew. He was born and his life was in danger, on the run from a petty tyrant who only desired wealth and security for himself and his family, like so many tyrants past and present. Mary held him close, running with Joseph to save his life.

Jesus knew: He witnessed that bodies endured what empire meted out - poverty, sickness, fear, isolation. So he came and he cured, healing broken

bodies and minds. He told the desperate that flocked to him they were not cursed but blessed by God. He taught them to serve God and to serve wealth was impossible, that a choice needed to be made. In his compassion, his suffering with, he restored sick and dying children to their mothers and fathers.

Jesus knew: Seeing that the crowds were hungry and that they had stayed with him until the evening, he instructed them to sit down on the grass and provided a feast for them right then and there. Matthew tells us that he didn't just do it once, but twice. He fed his disciples at the table making the connection between his own body and blood to the bread and wine.

Bodies were important to Jesus. He didn't do these things as mere signs of his authority, as signs to prove his identity, but because he came for them, as one of them.

Jesus knew: He knew what it felt like to be a slave, his body vulnerable, publicly whipped and beaten, thrown into prison and then to the place of mourning, that weeping and gnashing of teeth, as the women who had provided for him had gathered, where he entered the darkness of the cross crying out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Because he came for us. As one of us.

We have to do a few backflips with the gospel text this morning. Maybe it's all we can do as we hear it in our time, for ourselves and for the world around us. For if we know these things about Jesus, if we have been found by God's mercy and love, if our lived experiences of who this Jesus is, God with us and for us, then we have little choice at those acrobatics this morning.

The gospel lets us know: He is the one who faced the darkness for us, who faced the watery depths with us, and he is the one who has promised not to abandon us there.

The gospel lets us know: He is the one who has loved us into life and he is the one who will let nothing separate us from that Love. Nothing. Because together we die and together we rise, no longer bound, but free.

Amen.