From Those Who Have Nothing
(Matthew 25:14-30)

When my oldest son Samuel was in grade school, he collected Pokémon cards. Fairly inexpensive thing to do—which was a good thing because I was studying full-time and teaching classes at U of L for Teaching Assistant pay.

Not having a lot of money, one of the ways we'd incentivize good behavior—to make up for the fact that we didn't have much money—was to say, "If you and your sister don't fight, and if you do your chores, we'll take you to Walmart this weekend to buy more Pokémon cards."

Though an obvious bow to late-stage capitalism, it was a pretty effective incentive program—it worked, and it was cheap.

But when the weekend rolled around, Susan had to work, and I was working on an article that would loom large in landing a tenure-track professor job—so I was extra consumed with it.

Anyway, Samuel came to me and asked when we were going to go to Walmart to get some Pokémon cards. At the time, we didn't have a Walmart nearby. We had to drive all the way out to Westport Road to get to the closest one—and, like I said, I was busy. So, I told him, "Hey buddy, I apologize, but I'm swamped. I'm not going to be able to take you this weekend. I'm sorry."

I knew he wouldn’t like my answer, but I didn't know how ***much*** he wouldn't. In his defense, I'd ***told*** him we'd head out to Walmart to get Pokémon cards on the weekend. So, his displeasure was surely understandable. But I wasn't prepared for how intense it was.

He was ticked, stomping around, decrying the sad state of the world and how utterly unfair life is. And I'd promised. And he'd been looking forward to this all week. You know this goes.

I said, "I know, sweetie. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm super busy and have to finish this. I'll take you next week.”

Then he said something that sticks with me to this day. If you've raised young children, you've almost certainly heard it yourself. He stomped up to his bedroom, protesting to the heavens: "This is the worst day ***ever***!"

I took a breath and collected myself. And, guilty as I felt, I wanted to say, "Sweetie, this is definitely not the worst day ever. And if I'm wrong, and this does turn out to be the worst day you ever have in your whole life, I’ll die happy."

As a forty-something-year-old at the time, I had a pretty good idea that he'd have much worse days than that and that if he only knew what he might have to endure as a human being on this planet, he would never say that not getting Pokémon cards one weekend was the cause of the worst day ever.

But given his experience of the world up to that point, there's no way he could have understood it. As an adult, I had the advantage of having lived through many far worse days. I knew, for example, that the League Championship Series in 2003 when Steve Bartman interfered with a foul ball in the eighth inning, which led to a string of blunders that caused the Cubs to miss out on going to the World Series for the first time since World War II was a pretty awful day in the history of the world.

I knew having one of our living room chairs blow off the back of the pickup truck on I-75 in downtown Detroit during rush hour as Susan and I moved to Tennessee was a bad day.

Or when the basement flooded and ruined boxes of my books. All really bad days, and that doesn't even take into account days that have dealt with life and death—like the day my family decided that I was the only one who should tell my dad that it was time for us to call in Hospice.

But for Samuel to understand his fourth-grade disappointment as a disappointment, not a world tragedy, he would have needed a perspective he couldn’t possess at the time. Such a perspective comes only with the wisdom that comes with experience.

Perspective makes all the difference, doesn't it?

The world looks one way, but then you wake up and find it's not; it's something entirely different.

After the 2016 election, one of my favorite podcasters, Merlin Mann, summed up my feelings perfectly. He said: "When I woke up on November 9th after the cosmic gut punch from the night before, it wasn't just that I felt like we'd lost the baseball game. I felt like I no longer understood baseball."

Perspective. You look at a picture, and you very clearly see a duck. But after a bit, somebody says, "That's not a duck; it's a rabbit." And now you can't unsee it.

The picture doesn't change, just your point of view.

I'm going to suggest to you that, once again, the traditional interpretation of this passage in our Gospel this morning is a matter of perspective.

Looking at the history of interpretation, we find two schools. One school views this parable through the lens of "end times." After what appears at first glance to be faithful service, the first two servants are ushered into the "joy of their master"—like those who are faithful on judgment day will be ushered into heaven.

A second, perhaps more popular, strain of interpretation over the past hundred years or so has treated this parable as a morality tale: Three servants are present—two are pronounced "good and faithful" after making investments, while the third is chastised for being "wicked and lazy" because he failed to invest and merely buried his master's dough.

This take on the parable suggests that Jesus is asking which kind of servant his hearers want to be—the "good" industrious ones or the "lazy" and shiftless ones. And, as with all morality tales, there's a right and a wrong answer.

One way this interpretation has been used in the last century is to liken the "talents" dispensed to the enslaved people as precisely that: talents. Or, as my upbringing would have called them, "gifts"—as in, "Are you making the proper investment of time and resources to invest the gifts God gave you, or are you merely a spiritual malingerer, keeping your talents to yourself?"

My mom was a big one for reminding us that “God gave you a talent; if you don't use it, God may take it away.”

Does that sound familiar?

Both streams of interpretation have a long history—neither of which I'm saying is necessarily invalid. Scripture almost always contains more than a single "true" interpretation.

But these two strains of interpretation again fail to account for how Jesus' listeners would have heard this story. Because their perspective on what Jesus was about—given the world in which they lived—would have been different from Matthew's readers' perspective over a half-century later—not to mention the perspective of modern readers, which is radically different from the world of Jesus' listeners.

One lingering problem in traditional readings of the parable of the talents is the nature of the main character. As with so many parables, the assumption has customarily been that the "man, going on a journey" is God. Interpreters have largely taken for granted that God is the one who hands out the talents. But at least a couple of problems are raised by seeing God as the "dispenser-of-talents."

First, the idea of God enslaving human beings feels… well… gross. But beyond our general distaste for the thought of God owning exploited labor, we need to consider what the master is doing by giving the talents to the enslaved.

In the ancient Near East, the only way to amass wealth was to take it from somebody else. Since land was the primary measure of wealth, acquiring more land was the only way to get rich. But because land isn't something you can manufacture —like Pokémon cards or MAGA hats—to get more, you have to take it from somebody.

Because owning land was essential in this part of the world, the most common way to acquire more was to take it from the peasants—most likely by foreclosing on defaulted debt. In other words, the master accumulated his wealth mainly through exploiting vulnerable people in need.

In this parable, then, the master—who's made his wealth by exploiting peasant labor—orders those he’s enslaved to exploit ***their*** neighbors to make the master even ***more*** money. The master coopts two of the subjugated peasants to subjugate others.

That doesn't sound like God to me.

Second, if God is the master in this story, the third enslaved man's words are hard to maneuver around.

Why?

The third, when asked what he did with the talent he'd been given, says, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you didn't sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground."

The word the third man uses to describe the master is the Greek word ***skleros***, from which we get the word *sclerotic* and *sclerosis*, which means "hardened," as in "hardening of the arteries"—and in a non-medical sense, means rigid and unresponsive. In Greek, it meant harsh or merciless.

If the master in the parable is ***skleros***, as the third man suggests (and the master doesn't deny), then God as the "master" in this story feels wrong. It's difficult to imagine Jesus telling a story about God in which God is described as rigid and merciless.

That's why context and perspective are so crucial. Because though Jesus' audience likely saw the master as the "bad guy" and the first two servants as collaborators, readers 2,000 years and 7,000 miles away have no way of knowing why without a little detective work.

I want to suggest that when Jesus told this parable to his listeners, unlike traditional interpretations, they would have seen

the third enslaved man as the hero of the story. Talk about the duck turning into a rabbit.

Because the third guy was the only one with the courage to speak the truth about a system that was rigged against the vulnerable peasants: "I knew that you were a merciless man. You've amassed land that belonged to other people—and so you reap where you did not sow (that is to say, you reap for yourself the crops that other people sow to feed their families), and you gather the food from places where other people scattered seed to make it through another time of scarcity."

And what happened to the third man when he presumed to speak truth to power?

The third enslaved man is treated like whistleblowers regularly are when they lay bare the despicable truth: The master in this story, as has so often been the case throughout history, isn't a benevolent employer handing out generous Christmas bonuses;

he's a boss who's gotten rich by exploiting the labor of others—and when he's called out for it, he gets defensive… lashes out.

In fact, if the third man looks like anyone, he looks like Jesus before both the Roman authorities and their collaborators in the temple as Holy Week unfolds. And what do the masters of empire do to Jesus for presuming to speak the truth to power?

They do what they do to ***every*** whistleblower: they "vilify, shame, and humiliate him so that his words will carry no weight" (William Herzog).

And then they throw him into the outer darkness, where weeping and gnashing of teeth are apparently an Olympic event.

And we, who claim to follow this Jesus, what do we do? How do we live into this parable?

We speak up. We tell the truth about the exploitation of the dispossessed. We put our bodies in between the oppressed and the oppressor.

When we hear about another Black man being abused by the police, we refuse to remain silent.

When we see our neighbors torn from their homes and families and thrown into private, for-profit jails, we resist.

When we watch another woman being harassed and abused, we say, "No!"

When we read about vulnerable people being evicted and left to survive in the streets, we find a way not only to help feed and shelter but to agitate for justice in housing.

When we witness Christian nationalists openly advocating bigotry and threatening violence, we don't sit idly by and hope everything turns out all right; we take sides.

We, followers of Jesus, not only sound the alarm but also find a way to be present with those suffering.

No longer will the abundance God desires for all of us be taken from those who have nothing.

If Jesus is who we ***say*** he is, and if we are who we say ***we*** are, then the reign of God's peace and justice for all people is the new perspective from which we see everything.

—Amen.