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

When Samuel was in grade school, he used to collect 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 on the weekend to buy more Pokemon cards."

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

But one weekend, Susan had to work, and I was working on an article, which was going to loom large in landing a job as a tenure-track professor—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 that time, we didn't have a Walmart close by. We had to drive all the way out to Westport Road and the Gene Snyder 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 like my answer. In his defense, I'd told him earlier in the week that we'd head out to Walmart over the weekend to get Pokémon cards. So, his displeasure was surely understandable. But it was the intensity of it that I was unprepared for.

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."— I almost said, "I promise," but realized that that wouldn't help.

It was 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, all the while 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 will 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 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 that having one of our living room chairs blow off the back of the pickup truck in downtown Detroit on I-75 during rush hour as Susan and I were moving 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 could 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 and not a world tragedy, he would have needed a perspective he could not possess at the time. Such a perspective only comes with the wisdom developed with experience.

Perspective makes all the difference, doesn't it?

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

After the election of 2016, 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.

Reading through the history of interpretation of this, 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 this parable serve 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 essentially suggests that what Jesus is doing here 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, walking around 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?

As I say, both streams of interpretation have a long history—neither of which I'm saying is ***necessarily*** invalid. Scripture is ***multivalent***—meaning it almost always admits of more than a single "true" interpretation.

But what these two strains of interpretation fail to take into account once again is 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 the perspective of ***Matthew's*** readers over a half-century later—not to mention the perspective of ***modern*** readers, which is radically different from the world of Jesus' listeners.

One of the lingering problems of the 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 gives 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 at the thought of God owning exploited labor, we need to think about what the master is doing by giving the talents to the enslaved.

As we've discussed before, the only way to amass wealth in the ancient Near East 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, it has to come from somebody.

And because owning land was a necessary part of surviving in this part of the world, the most common way to get more was to take it from the peasants—most likely by foreclosing on defaulted debt. In other words, the master got his wealth mainly through exploitation.

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

That doesn't sound like God.

Second, if God is the master in this story, the words of the third enslaved man are difficult 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 knowing the context and having perspective is so crucial. Because, though Jesus' audience would have immediately seen 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?

As William Herzog points out,

> The judgment is immediate. Having spoken the truth, the servant must be vilified, shamed, and humiliated so that his words will carry no weight … It is an oppressive elite who labels the servant "wicked" and "lazy" to stigmatize him and dismiss his implied criticism … The aristocratic master's address is not to be taken at face value, as so many commentators have done. It is an attack on a whistle-blower. The servant has unmasked the "joy of the master" for what it is, the profits of exploitation squandered in wasteful excess, and he has demystified "good" and "trustworthy" by exposing the merciless oppression they define.

The third servant 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 over the following two chapters. 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."

And then they throw him into the outer darkness, where weeping and gnashing of teeth are 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. 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 the families of immigrants and asylum seekers torn apart, 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 White nationalists openly advocate bigotry and threaten 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 figure out a way to be in the middle of it—organizing, protesting, lobbying, healing, and dispensing the mercy denied by the merciless.

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.