

**The Least of These**  
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Matthew 25:14-46

Sometimes a sermon falls into your lap. Sometimes it comes from a Lapp. This sermon began as I was formulating a response to Cindy's sermon last week. I decided that rather than offer a five-minute sermon response, I'd expand it into a full response sermon. I was intrigued and inspired by a central idea in her sermon, and I want to explore that idea in light of today's Gospel passage.

I hope you know me well enough by now to understand that I take scripture seriously. In order to wrestle, engage, debate, love or hate any part of the Bible, I think it is most honest and most worthwhile to engage with it on its own terms — to take it seriously first according to its own standards, to understand its own message. I don't mean to suggest that we can approach a passage without whatever bias and baggage we bring — that would be impossible. But, as with people, I think we need to first accept the scripture as it is in order to have an honest conversation with it.

As such, I generally find myself skeptical when I hear a radical new interpretation of a difficult passage — especially when the new interpretation serves to support the pre-existing bias of the person doing the interpreting. My inclination is, rather than trying to re-write scripture, to admit that either I don't understand or I disagree with that particular passage and to continue wrestling with it.

But occasionally a new interpretation comes along that allows things to

click into place in a new way — it makes connections with other passages and makes sense in its own right.

That was the case for me last week as Cindy explored the good ol' American capitalist parable of the talents.

If I may recap Cindy, or at least what I thought I heard Cindy saying: the traditional reading of the parable of the talents casts the harsh manager as God and us as the slaves. The manager rewards and honors the slaves who are shrewd and can make money grow, and punishes the slave who hides the money away. So traditionally we say that God wants us to be good stewards of our money (and in many sermons, our other “talents” as well).

But, what if we go along with Cindy and try to peel off the veneer of American capitalism? What if we remove the assumption that the master is righteous and right, and the slaves are treated justly? What if we accept what may be our initial gut reaction to the story — that the last slave was treated unfairly? And what if we notice that the master never denies the accusations of the last slave — that he is “a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not sow seed”? And finally, what if we strip away the idea that “master” always equals “God”?

Now here's where Cindy really got my attention — what if we interpret the various characters in this story in light of the passage that follows it? It always pays to look at a passage in context; otherwise we risk proof-texting, or missing important connections between stories.

What if we take the master from the “talents” story and put him among the

sheep and the goats? The standards that the master applied to his slaves are suddenly turned on their head. The master now meets a Jesus who is known to say things like “blessed are the poor” and “woe to the rich.” Had he fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, cared for the sick and visited the prisoner? Just paragraphs before, we saw this master cast a poor slave into the outer darkness. The slave had accused the master of cheating and taking advantage of the poor, and now the master learns that Jesus was hanging out with the poor all along. So now the master is a goat.

In fact, this story of the sheep and the goats may be read entirely as a hyperbolic retelling of the parable of the talents. It comes at the end of a long string of bizarre apocalyptic tales. Towards the beginning of chapter 24, Jesus says, "Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah!' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs. (Doesn't this just sound like a summer in Washington?) Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout

the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.”

It is interesting to me that Jesus is responding to a question about the end of days, and launches to what I think must be understood as a description of the world as it is *every day*, from the time of Jesus right down to us. There have always been wars and disasters, persecution and destruction.

Next we have stories of wise and foolish bridesmaids, diligent and lazy slaves, and finally sheep and goats, each of which ends with locked doors, weeping and gnashing of teeth, outer darkness and some unpleasant images of eternal fire. But here’s a possibility. Could it be that Jesus is redirecting his disciples from focusing on the end of all things and onto how to live in a desperate world?

All of the stories up until the sheep and the goats have an element of waiting and preparing. The “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is a consequence of not being prepared. Worldly people with power in the stories reward the richly prepared and punish the unprepared. But in this final story a master arrives — one whom Jesus specifically identifies with himself rather than a character assumed to be him — who honors and rewards those who loved and served the poor. I think there is an intentional contrast between this master and the master in the prior story. And Jesus takes the description of earthly punishment — locked doors and outer darkness — and magnifies it, saying that what is done to those who are poor in this world will come back upon the heads of those who persecute.

When it comes down to it, this entire eschatological sequence is less

about some terrifying end of days and final judgment and more about how we care for humanity in the here and now.

Following Jesus means adopting a radically different way of being in the world. Extravagant wealth, shrewd business deals and being recognized for our worth will not impress the Christ who comes to us as a beggar. Sharing what we have extravagantly, dealing justly and recognizing the worth of others makes us part of Christ's rag-tag family.