

The Third Slave

Matthew 25:14-30

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The Rev. Kara Wagner Sherer

St. John's Episcopal Church

This is how the world is. Developers with money can buy up a whole city block, buy out the leases of the renters, end the leases of the small businesses, raze everything to the ground, and build a big box store where jobs go for minimum wage and high end condos where there is more space than residents.

This is how the world is. If you have money, you can invest in some new scheme like Bitcoin, you can make a bucket of money, and pull out of the market before it crashes.

This is how the world is. If you need to get tires on your car and you don't have the money you can take your paycheck to a payday loan place and get a loan that you will have to pay back in two weeks. Did you know that in Illinois the maximum interest allowed on payday loans is 400%? If you're lucky, you can get a six-month loan with the interest rate capped at 22.5%.

This is how the world is. And it seems like the world is not that different from the time when Jesus told this story. This is how the story goes; a master goes on a journey and gives money to his slaves. Now here's where it's a little different, the word "talent" in Jesus' time meant only one thing- it meant a coin, money. Now that word has come to mean skills, talents. But when Jesus tells this story he is talking about a coin, a talent, which was worth the equivalent of a lifetime of wages. Today, one talent would be worth about a half a million dollars, an average lifetime of accumulated wages. So, this master does an unbelievable and crazy thing, giving to the slave five talents, 2.5 million dollars, to another two talents, and to one, one talent, a half a million dollars.

The first two slaves do as their master has taught them. They invest, they buy up the land of the poor and sell it for twice as much. They put money in offshore accounts to avoid taxes. They set up payday loan schemes. They take from those who have little. This is how the story goes. Those who have much, get more. "And to those who have nothing, even that will be taken away."

The third slave might be the one faithful Jew in the story. He knows that scripture prohibits usury, the taking of interest, because it is unfair to the poor. That slave refuses to buy into the cheating and scheming of his master. Rather than imitate his master, he buries half a million dollars in the ground and returns it to his master. He opts out of the system. And so, he's thrown out of the master's house into the darkness. It's hell, yes, but not end-of-the-world-afterlife hell. He is thrown into the hell of *this life* with those who are weeping and those who are gnashing their teeth because they are cold and hungry and live in fear. The joy of the master that the other two slaves enter into – do you notice? – is still slavery. The one thing he could give them would be freedom. But they are still slaves.

I think it's very important to know who's who in this parable. The master is not God. The master is the way the world is. It is the systems that we have set up to favor some and oppress others. The master is not God. God gives an abundance to all living things. God never goes on a journey and leaves us alone. God is beside us always. And God does not throw anyone into outer darkness. In fact, if the master is the way the world works, then we are slaves 1 and 2. We are slaves when we buy into the lies of this world, when we put productivity over justice, when we put money over people, when we buy into the lie that those who have much should get more and that even what the poor have should be taken away.

And if we are slave 1 and 2, who is slave number 3? The one who had one life to live, who lived it with such integrity and love, who would not give into the ways of the world and so the world, we, killed him, hung him on a cross. Slave 3 is the one who was buried for three days, who gave his whole self for us. The third slave is Jesus.

So, will we buy into the ways of the world? Will we remain in slavery to those things which the world values, but God does not? Or will we follow and imitate in our own life the one who gave up his whole life in order to be with those who were poor, oppressed, and hungry? Because the outer darkness where the vulnerable live is where God lives. And we want to be with God.