

# Digging for Gold

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Judges 4: 1-7; Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

“One of the unsung gifts of revisiting scripture, over and over, throughout a lifetime is how we can still find new depths, new meanings, new wisdom in ancient words. We can read a story a dozen times at a dozen different points in our lifetime but that cumulative gift of patience and decades and the Spirit somehow illuminates something new, different, or reorienting. Perhaps the gift of a passage or a story or a line of scripture isn’t fully revealed to us until we’ve lived into it a bit, you know? Or perhaps it is that what it means now at this stage of your life is completely different than what it meant in your teens, your twenties, your thirties, your forties, and so on. It can take time to live into all the layers of sacred stories. Then Scripture becomes an ever-widening circle that include our own stories, needs, times, learnings, sorrows, and experiences with the Spirit, too.”<sup>1</sup>

How else would I have discovered Deborah and Jael<sup>2</sup> - two of the most amazing powerful women in the Bible? I keep finding stories they never told us ...or we have forgotten. Mind you, it would be hard to sanitise Jael’s gruesome murder of Sisera<sup>3</sup> into Sunday school panto.

Stories have a way of growing and engraining themselves in other forms. They live on like some many tenacles or fruit-children from their sources. Take the musical *West Side Story* and we see Shakespear’s Romeo and Juliette just below the surface. In my first year at college, there were only 2 of us in our class that had read the Bible. We were studying a science fiction story called “The Gadarene Swine” which was about some scientists trying to convince the world of a coming catastrophe<sup>4</sup> but no one was listening...they preferred accommodations rather than change their ways. Only 2 of us in the class really understood the symbolism.

So, as we hear stories again and again, in many iterations and fruitful offsprings, and as we grow older, get wiser, possibly change our thinking – the stories become new again. There is much to gain from going back to them again and again – but like we’ve not heard them before. Suddenly a word we’ve never noticed before like ‘Ethiopian’ pops out and for the first time we realise eunuch was a man of colour. Or when we are reading fiction like Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Gold Bug” we see its relationship to the master’s greed in Matthew’s story. Three years ago, we looked at the Matthew story

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Bessey’s Field Notes sarahbessey@substack.com 14/11/23

<sup>2</sup> As of 2018, Yael was one of the most common female first names in contemporary Israel.

<sup>3</sup> She put a tent peg through his temple

<sup>4</sup> Written long before climate change was a thing – it was basically prophetic – the story relates to Mark 5:11-13

from a variety of angles. I'd like to revisit them again. We have a few more historical points to add but most importantly, we are 3 years wiser.

As an aside, I just learned that this is the time of year that most north American churches are doing their annual fundraising/pledging drives for stewardship. This parable can be misused to convince people to dig deeper and sacrifice more. It would certainly boost the budget but then it degrades the genuine spirit of giving and is virtually in direct conflict with the main lesson of the parable. That is, those who don't deserve, who don't plant seeds should/should not get 10 times more.

There's the first problem with this story. It's written backwards. It may not be about what we should do but what we should not...but more on that later.

However we look at it, this parable is a genuine Jesus teaching moment – how should we look at it? First of all, it's not allegory. Don't look to find God or Jesus as any of the characters – they are JUST CHARACTERS in a story. It is just a story.

Apparently, this parable has baffled and embarrassed scholars for centuries.<sup>5</sup>

As a Pastor and later, a Minister in training, I was regularly invited to preach in different churches across the state. What I didn't know was Ministers would look through the lectionary and pick the readings they didn't want to explain. The talents/bags of gold? *always* on the list, ... as well as Trinity Sunday.

Now I've read just about everything there is to read on this parable. And I can tell you – there is no agreement on exactly what it means. Every year something new pops up. I'm going to list a few different ways it has been interpreted, with of course, my own bias and you get to make up your mind.<sup>6</sup>

The simple one – Fundamentalists like this one.

I've got no problem with getting back to basics. But many of the people I have met who call themselves fundamentalists are actually reductionists. They strip the Gospel of its, historic, linguistic, social and theological foundations so that they can interpret *English* words through a simplistic prism. They simplify to a literal misnomer.

This story is usually read as the parable of the talents. I intentionally used a translation that plainly describes it as 'bags of gold' so there can be no confusion. In the real world, talents are "**units of measurement for weighing precious metals**"<sup>7</sup>, "Talents" is not a homonym in Hebrew or Greek (in other words, it doesn't have the double meaning it has in English) but in a reductionist view, 'talents' the play on the

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<sup>5</sup> Crossen

<sup>6</sup> Right after writing this, I received another excellent interpretation from John Emmett. *Jesus' yarn about the entrepreneurial pretender!*

<sup>7</sup> Google any dictionary "Bible Talents" and you will get the same answer

word becomes “a natural aptitude or skill”. It is said, this parable is about taking the gifts that God gave you and growing them...and if you bury them, you are committing a sin. Hiding your talents in the dirt. Despite my prejudices, I like it. It’s simple and we can all understand it. While it may not be accurate for this particular story, it is fairly plain that God does not want us to hide our gifts.

A Catholic commentary focuses on the value of the talent. Paraphrasing the article: why did the man with only one talent bury it and Mr 2 and Mr 5 didn’t? This commentary says it’s because it was such a small amount, he didn’t think it was worth the trouble. But, the text says, Christ expects that we will work with the gifts we are given, whether they are few or many.

Another way to look at it ...

The American prosperity churches accept that the Talents are indeed bags of gold and you are obligated to grow the wealth that God gave you. If you do, you will be blessed and if you don’t, you’re off to hell. You owe it to God to be successful and the more successful you are, the more blessed. In these churches, they *want* their Ministers to wear Cartier and drive around in big luxury cars. It is a sign of the generosity and blessedness of the whole congregation. They build fabulous churches with the latest in electronic equipment and stage worship with professional musicians and sound mixers. The more wealth, the more blessed and what better way to show it?

Feel free to grasp this one. I’m waiting for the Jaguar.

The downside, of course, is that they are not giving their riches to the poor, they are feathering their heavenly nest. Not much like the take-nothing-with-you Jesus I know.

A more scholarly approach says that the servants<sup>8</sup> should be risk takers – for God. The more they were willing to risk, the more their reward. That those who were timid would not see the Kingdom of heaven. I don’t know if this works for me. However, Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience – an entirely Jewish audience. At the time, the risk of taking up the cross was more than not being allowed to worship in a synagogue. It was an act of rebellion which led to ostracization and oppression, not just from your own people but the Romans as well. I’m guessing the loss of community could be devastating and it would have economic implications as well.

Rex Hunt, writing for progressives says, what if this is one of the reversal stories? That is, do the opposite of what the story says. He says this parable is pointing out corruption. Note the Master confesses he reaps what he **hasn’t** sown. He admits

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<sup>8</sup> In other translations, they are ‘slaves’

being a usurer and he expects others to be the same. Mr 1-Talent refuses to play the corruption game. He is the whistle-blower. The truth teller. This is what happens to whistle-blowers, they get thrown in to the darkness and there is gnashing of teeth. The man who does nothing is actually the hero of the story. He is standing up and refusing to be part of it. The clue is how the master is clearly established as a bad guy ...” you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? ” This is a punch line! “For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” At this point, it is like a Punch and Judy show and the audience would fall about laughing.

Why all the confusion???

Because... Biblical literary critics say we miss much of the Bible because we were not there. There are conventions and in-jokes that only locals can know and they have long disappeared in the scraps that wound up in the Canon. Sort of like today where you know most of the Knock- knock jokes – so if I say “knock, knock” you know what will follow is a joke. 100 years from now, they won’t get it. Also, we can’t hear irony in an email or in the written word. It is the oral tradition that gives us clues to meaning. Emmett says, “I can almost hear the crowd rippling with laughter at that poor bloke as Jesus tells this ripping yarn! The crowd would have understood how commerce of their day worked...” And stories are a safe art to contain political satire where political comment would normally get them killed.

The point I am trying to make is that every story has an author, and every author and reader has a time and place AND a lens through which s/he sees the story. We see different things as we grow through our own stages, Children’s ears pick up when children are mentioned. 10 years later, they won’t notice. We may emphasise what we see as important at the time and perhaps, skip over what is uncomfortable. Some stories, like Deborah, hardly ever get told and that may be a gender thing, who knows?

That’s why it is important to read them again and again. Sometimes God breaks through the narrative in unexpected ways. It could be a word, an image or even a prayer that wells up from the text.

Jesus called each of us to offer ourselves. Are we the bags of gold? How does that speak to you?

*Jesus the teacher, help me wrestle with every word and story. Help me hear with fresh ears your good news. And most of all, help me live your story in ours. Amen.*

References: Borg, M. *Jesus*; Brueggemann, Cousin et al, *Texts for Preaching Year A*; Duckworth SM, *This is the word of the Lord: the Year of Matthew*; Foster, Willard et al, The RenovarÈ Spiritual Foundation Bible; Hunt, RAE, *When progressives gather together*; John Emmett, Nov 23, *Jesus' yarn about the entrepreneurial pretender*