

How much talent can a talent buy

I spent Thursday mostly walking and talking with my friend Maria. Her cancer has come back, We talked about Plan B and about how, when and what to tell the family. The problem, she discovered, is that when she states a fact like this the person she is talking to seems to write her story for her right before her eyes. We skip right over 'what's next?' to "you should"... make arrangements; sell the house; move closer to family and more. Their imaginations had her dying before they had finished their coffee. The problem is, she feels well and we do not yet have information about possible treatments. All we have is a tiny fact.

Think about it – stories seem to be written by other people. The stories our families tell about us say more about them than about us.

The stories we tell ourselves can be life altering. We can be the child who was never going to amount to much or the strong one who can shoulder all the family responsibilities. We learn we are the pretty one or the smart one. We don't choose these yet we take up the narrative we've been told.

And then there is the prism (the crystal) that throws out colours from each person's lived experience. Have you ever had a conversation where 3 or 4 people have saw the same thing or met the same person and all have a very different view of what happened? My brothers and sisters don't agree on any Christmas past. "Oh that was the one where you...". "No, it wasn't – "

Let's look at Matthew's story of the talents from a number of perspectives. (or through several prisms, if you like).

First Jesus. The Jesus Seminar with all its Biblical Authority is almost certain these **are** the words of Jesus...all except the last line. The darkness and gnashing of teeth was added later, probably by Matthew.

The Biblical scholars know this by three major things...

1. Matthew is the most judgemental Gospel. He puts people in Hell all the time. Matthews image of God might be very different from yours and mine. One day, we will talk about the different images of God in the Gospels. I'll admit Matthew's God makes me a little uncomfortable. But remember he is coming from and Old testament base.
2. Luke's version of the same parable ends in an entirely different way -thank you Luke

3. Jesus lessons are rarely threatening, they tend to be invitational. Not do this or die.

Perhaps there were times when Jesus wasn't as forthright as his disciples might have wanted, so the Gospel writers beefed it up a bit. Remembering they came from a very vengeful God-history.

Anyway, now we know for sure, this is a genuine teaching moment – how should we look at it?

Apparently, this parable has baffled and embarrassed scholars for centuries.¹

I didn't know that, I was so naïve. Naïve you say, how? Well, when I was 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 look at the readings ahead and pick the ones they don't want to do. The talents? *always* on the list, as well as Trinity Sunday, because no one wanted to explain it away...so they left it to the rookie.

Lucky me. Now I've read just about everything there is to read on this parable . And I can tell you – there is no agreement. Let's look at their perspectives – or through the crystal. You make up your mind.

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. "Talents" is not a homonym is Hebrew or Greek.

And so, in this version, Talents are not "**units of measurement for weighing precious metals**"², they are 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.

A Catholic perspective focuses on the value of the talent. Paraphrasing the commentary: 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 ...

¹ Crossen

² Google any dictionary "Bible Talents" and you will get the same answer

The American prosperity churches accept that the Talents are indeed money 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. In these churches, they *want* their Ministers to wear Cartier and drive around in big luxury cars. It is a sign of their blessedness. 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 down side, of course, is that they are not giving their riches to the poor, they are feathering their heavenly nest. Not much like the Jesus I know.

A more scholarly approach says that the slaves 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 ostracisation 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. I can't know how threatening that might be because I wasn't there.

There is a part of this commentary that strikes a chord with me. Is it possible that he be that he might have been saying 'abandon your vengeful (Jewish) God for a loving God'? ...but then Matthew trashes that by adding the weeping and gnashing of teeth. So I'm confused.

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 being a usurer. 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 3rd slave that does nothing is actually the hero of the story.

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.

The point I am trying to make is that every story has an author and in the re-telling, every author has a prism through which s/he sees the story. They may emphasize one thing that speaks to them and barely mention another part of the story that is uncomfortable, unimportant or even embarrassing.

Rachel Held Evans says, “The Gospel means that every small story is a part of a sweeping story, every ordinary life part of an extraordinary movement. God is busy making all things new and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has opened that work to everyone who wants to be in on it. The church is not a group of people who believe in the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the centre.”³

The Gospel writers are all holding prisms in the hope that the different stories will reflect a more rounded and accurate Jesus. Gospels of different colours.

When my friend proclaims the state of her health, the stories that come back at her are the fears of her friends and family. *They* are not coping. *They* don't want to take the journey. They skip to the only destination they can imagine. Some just disappear. Others turn her immediately into an invalid so there is something *they can do*. They begin a grieving process

Is there a lesson in all of this? I guess it is as best you can, try to maintain control of your own narrative. Your own story. Matthew gave us his memory of the story adding his own ending – his own agenda. It is a rich meal to consider.

In your life, it is with your story. You write it.

Which kind of makes me lean towards the reductionist version,

Don't waste your talents.

Jesus called each of us to offer ourselves. How does this 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 our story. 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*

³ Rachel Held-Evans *Inspired*