

November 19, 2023
Matthew 25:14-30
Faithful Choices
Michael Stanfield

‘For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, “Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.” His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”

But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

So, take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For, to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”



Choices. This passage is about making, *good* choices.



AT&T has always billed itself as being “The Right Choice.” Well, back in the 2000’s, AT&T struck an agreement with New York City’s power company Con Ed that whenever demand strained the utility’s grid, AT&T would throw a switch, unplug some of its facilities, and draw power from internal generators at its 33 Thomas Street station in lower Manhattan.

And that’s what happened on September 17, 2001 – just one week after the terrorist attacks of 9-11.

However, the power surge of generators kicking in also kicked out vital rectifiers – rectifiers that handled 4.5 million domestic calls, 470,000 international calls, 1,174 flights across the nation carrying 85,000 passengers, and the total communications system linking air traffic controllers at LaGuardia, Kennedy and Newark airports.

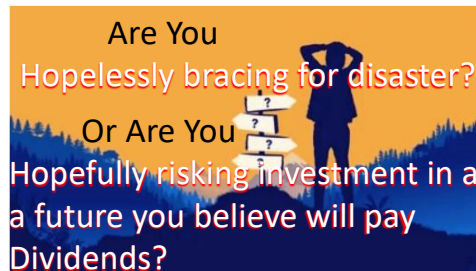
For six long hours alarm bells rang inside 33 Thomas Street. But the problem was, nobody heard them. The reason? Nobody was there. The terrorist attacks made the executives of AT&T decide to send all of *its* Thomas Street personnel in charge of these rectifiers to a one-day seminar.

And can you guess the title of this seminar? “How to Handle Emergencies.”

AT&T learned that hunkering down and expecting and planning for the worst out of a fear of what *might* happen is no guarantee that one will be safe from disaster when it strikes. In fact, the very act of responding to the world in fear with a bunker mentality can actually make things worse when the unthinkable does happen.



Are you:
Hopelessly bracing or preparing for impending disaster? Or

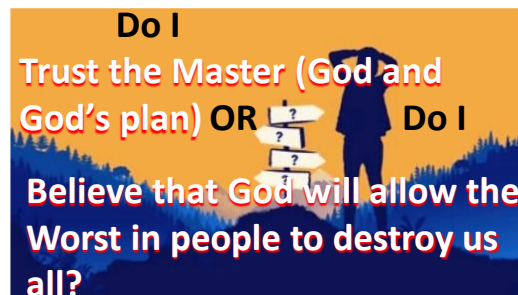


Are you:
Hopefully risking investment in a future that you believe is bound to pay dividends?

This is really what this parable is all about.



Do I trust the master (that is, God and God's plan for the future), or



Do I believe that God (if God even really exists) will allow the worst in people to eventually destroy us all ?

That is the difference between the one-talent servant and the other two.

But whence comes the difference? What keeps the one talent servant from taking the risk while the two and five talent servants are all in?

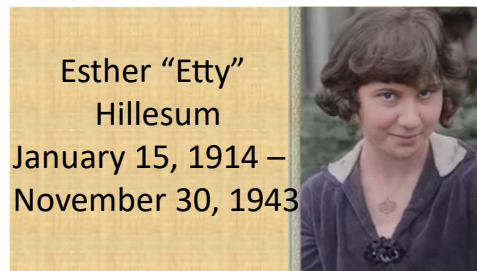
Well, it seems fairly plain from the text:



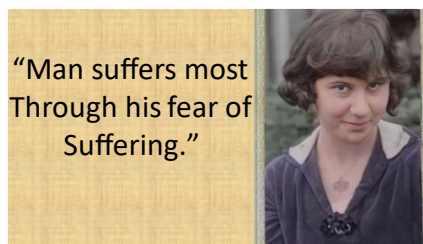
It comes from an overfocus on self-preservation.

“Master,” Says the one-talent servant, “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; *so I was afraid... so I was afraid* and I went and hid your talent in the ground.”

I was afraid.

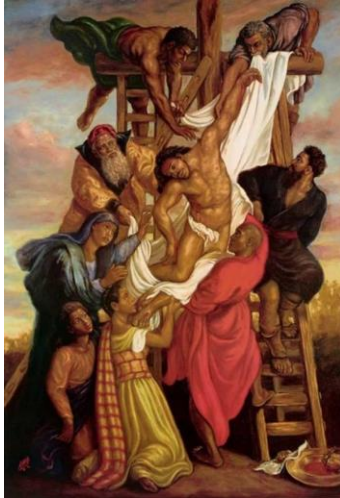


I recently discovered a rare gem: the writings of Esther “Ettty” Hillesum who you see here. Hillesum was the Dutch author of confessional letters and diaries which describe both her religious awakening and the persecutions of Jewish people in Amsterdam during the German occupation in the 1930s and 40s. In 1943 she was deported and killed in the Auschwitz concentration camp. As she watched fellow Jews being rounded up she wrote:

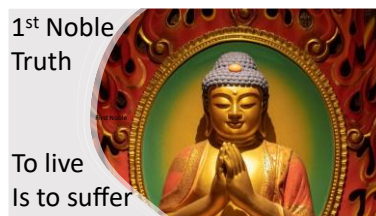


Man suffers most through his fear of suffering.

That *is* the real irony isn't it? That the greater suffering that happens in this old world is caused by the actions people take precisely *because* they are *afraid* they will suffer.



Well, if we wanted to avoid suffering, being a Christian was certainly not going to help us. Because I hate to tell you but at the center of *our* faith is a beaten man dying a horrible death on a cross.



And Christianity is not alone in its understanding of suffering. The first of the four noble truths of Buddhism is: “To live is to suffer.”

The Buddha taught that Suffering was inevitable but that it didn’t necessarily mean something was wrong.

But we humans – perhaps especially us Western Anglo humans, seem to be under the impression that we are not supposed to suffer. The result is that we often suffer the absolute most, not necessarily from the natural causes of suffering to which all living things are subject but *because* of the fear we have of suffering that accompanies our mistaken belief that we are not supposed to suffer.

And it would appear that we will go to any lengths in this direction even creating alternative realities on the internet that include wildly paranoid, completely fabricated stories about “what is really going on” that gives people a sense of control – all because they cannot face the fear that they are not in control at a time of great upheaval and change, and that suffering at some level, for every one of us during such a time as this, is inevitable.



Finding blame in the master, that is God, others – anyone but self – or simply the nature of being a living organism – will *not* save one.

Yet now, mass neurosis based in fear has morphed into a kind of mass psychosis – all in an attempt to avoid the fear of suffering.

But that is the way to death and darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing and teeth. The better alternative is to be less focused on self-preservation and more focused on how we love the other.



To love is also to suffer but it is to suffer *with* and suffering *with* another transmutes that suffering into joy. It is both the mystery and the experience of cross bearing...



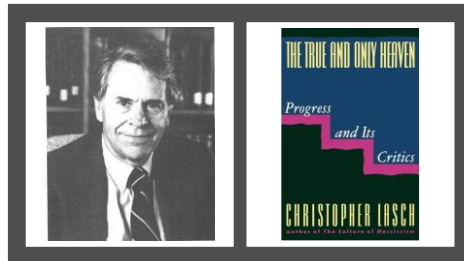
In March of 2020 when the coronavirus hit us with full force, contemplative writer, Richard Rohr, seen here, wrote the following on March 19, about a week into the pandemic here in the US.

“I hope this experience will force our attention outwards to the suffering of the most vulnerable. Love always means going beyond yourself to otherness. It takes two. There has to be the lover and the beloved. We must be stretched to an *encounter* with otherness, and only then do we know it’s love. This is what we call the subject-subject relationship...”



Love alone overcomes fear and is the true foundation that lasts.”

Indeed.



In *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991) historian Christopher Lasch says a critical juncture came in American Culture in the 1960s when we crowned choice above duty as our highest moral value and proposed that “one’s highest duty is to oneself.”



Yet the irony, again, is that complete focus on me and my right to choose for myself actually erodes my true self. As the apostle Paul says, “I become nothing but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.”

The very thing on which our culture and certainly the internet and social media rests: the assumption of neutrality about the endless options we have to choose from to enhance my sense of well-being, ends up tearing us apart.

The master’s judgement of the servant who buried his talent reveals that if we wish to be disciples, to call ourselves faithful servants, we need to do more with the gifts we have been

given than worry about our own well-being.



We need the love ethic of the gospel to guide us and we need to use it when we are approaching others whose information gathering over the last several years has been from dubious sources on the internet that are designed to do nothing but get one to stay on a site longer in order to bring in an extra buck to the owner of that site.

God gives immense gifts into our care out of love, including the information on the internet; therefore, the proper response is to use them but to do so *in service* and *in love* – rather than to blame and to hide.



Making decisions, given the staggering and often scary alternatives these days, is never easy. But choosing in every arena of our lives becomes less troublesome when the right goal is in view.

And it seems to me that the right goal as presented in this story of the talents is really rather simple – faithful service to a loving God, rather than self-preservation at all costs. If all our actions are centered on at least *trying* to act faithfully in serving a God who truly loves us, the eventual result, according to this parable, is that we enter into the joy of the Master – we share from the banquet table of the heavenly king.



But not having the view that God cares or loves us tends to leave us feeling as that one talent servant did – alone in a hostile, unfair and unforgiving culture.

And nothing has the power to encourage us to focus on service and faithfulness like an understanding of our mortality – that our time on this earth is limited.

One of the most powerful, positive stories of faithful living in the midst of dire circumstances is told by writer Niel Lorenz of Dayton, Ohio. Lorenz tells how her friend, a young wife and mother of three, chose to spend the last year of her life while afflicted with cancer. She says:

“Linda made it clear from the beginning that cancer was inconvenient, annoying and unwelcome, but that it would not rule her life. Accordingly, she and her whole family continued to take scuba lessons at a local pool to prepare for a big family vacation in the Cayman Islands. Linda was determined not just to go, but to participate in the family holiday. So adamant was she about this that when her blood count proved dismal the day before the intended trip, she simply checked herself into the hospital overnight, and received the medication she needed through an all-night I.V. connection.



Once in the islands, she rested and watched her family go out for their daily excursions to the reef. But she wanted to go diving with them, be a participant, not just an observer. In response to her incredible determination and positive spirit, a group of local diving instructors devised a way that she could join her family.



Because her spine was too brittle and ulcerated to bear the weight of the tank, they fitted her with a mask and mouthpiece and, as she breathed in it, they weighted her just enough to put her under the water. Then they floated an oxygen tank on a piece of foam above her and carefully added weights until Linda, the divers, and the tank slipped slowly beneath the surface. For nearly an

hour the entire family was able to explore the wonders of the island reefs.

Later, when Linda's husband Steve tried to pay for all the extra time and effort the dive team had gone to, he was turned down with these words:

“We dive here every day. We have seen that reef literally hundreds of times. We know every rock, every piece of coral and practically every fish on it. Today, however, we saw it through the eyes of someone with such courage, such spirit and such a zest for living that we looked at it in a different way. It is we who thank you and your family for the day. It is we who can never repay you.”



To love is to suffer but it is to suffer *with* and suffering *with* another transmutes that suffering into joy. The gifts that God gives us are immense. But sometimes life *does* seem too overwhelming; sometimes it just does not seem worth the effort to expend the energy.



But one thing is for certain, if we will only be as faithful as we can with the gifts we've been given by way of love, God will bless us and those around us in ways we had never imagined.

Let us pray. Gracious God, thank you for the great gifts we have been given – including the freedom to choose among many wonderful options. Help us to commit to the one option that is most important – you and your loving service. Amen