

I spent most of my vacation last week in Minnesota visiting my best friend and her family. She and I are both only children, but she had twins, my godchildren, who are now seven and a half. Although they were born minutes apart and raised by the same parents in the same house and attend the same school with the same teacher, they are growing into very different people, with unique personalities, habits, interests, and strengths. And yet, for all of those differences, they direct a lot of energy and attention to making sure things are “fair”...and by “fair” they almost always mean the same: did they get the same snack, did they get the same amount of time on the iPad, did they take the same number of turns in the game? I don’t know if it’s a twin thing, a sibling thing, a 7 year old thing, or maybe just a human thing, but we do seem invested in making sure things are fair...or if they are unfair, that at least we’re not the one getting the smaller half of the cookie. Of course, when we look at the big picture, we realize that we’re not all raised by the same parents in the same houses and educated at the same schools by the same teachers. We don’t all have the same abilities, resources, and opportunities, which means that just making sure any two people receive the same thing doesn’t mean we’ve achieved what is fair. Yet a parable that begins with one person getting five talents while another gets two and another only one is likely to make us uncomfortable...even if we’re told that the distribution happens according to ability.

The word *talent* is a little confusing. It does not refer to what happens after the swimsuit portion of the competition, as if the first slave could sing, dance, roller-skate, and twirl a baton while reciting the alphabet backwards, compared to the last slave only being able to whistle. That’s not to say that we don’t include our abilities when we are taking inventory of our gifts and resources, but a *talent* does not refer to a skill or ability; it was a monetary unit. In fact, a talent was an obscene amount of money, equivalent to decades worth of an average worker’s wages. Although the first slave receives five times as much, even the last slave who receives only one talent is still left with a ridiculous amount of money.

The master never specifies what the slaves are supposed to do with the money he is entrusting to them. The first two seem to understand that the expectation is for them to make even more money, which they do through trading. We aren’t told that their business is illegal or unethical, but we do have to wonder what kind of trading they engaged in to so successfully multiply their talents. Also notice that though we’re told the talents have been distributed according to ability, the first two slaves’ abilities produce the same result—doubling their money; one has to wonder whether the second slave would also have made five talents if he had been given five talents instead of two. Now again, the last slave is given a significant amount of money...but I can see why he’s a little grumpy and even a little fearful at the master’s apparent lack of confidence in him. After all, who appreciates being treated as if they only have half or even just a fifth of the ability of their peers? I’d be offended if the bishop implied I was only half or one fifth as good as the pastor at the next church down the road.

On his return, the master is pleased with the first two slaves. It's hard to imagine how wealthy he must be if he calls these huge amounts of money "a few things" and rewards them by giving them access to even more, but they have proven trustworthy. However, the master is not pleased with the last slave, who had buried his talent in the backyard out of fear. He justifies his actions (or inactions) by blaming the master's unrealistic expectations, but it's important to note that just because the last slave characterizes the master as "a harsh man...reaping where he doesn't sow and gathering where he doesn't scatter" that doesn't mean the master really is so harsh. That may be the slave's impression or opinion, but how harsh can someone be if they're willing to lend out their fortune and hope for the best. And if we're beginning to identify with one of the slaves in the story and finding an allegorical connection between the Master and God, we should also remember that just because this slave calls the master harsh, that doesn't mean God is harsh. We can't accurately say that God gathers where he doesn't scatter or reaps where he doesn't sow because God's creative force is responsible for all of the abundance of the earth. It would also be odd to find a perfect comparison between God and the Master since the Master criticizes the slave for not using investment bankers to earn him interest when money lending for interest was prohibited by God's law.

Perhaps the Master is not as harsh and demanding as the third slave says he is, but if that's the slave's assumption, we can see why he is afraid, why he won't take a risk, why he feels insignificant compared to the others who received more. We can imagine his hurt feelings contributing to his conservative approach: *Well, well, well: the Master thinks I've only got the ability to manage one measly talent, while that guy gets two and that other guy gets five? Fine. Me and my piddly little ability will sit right here and meet his low expectations.* The last slave seems to have missed the fact that, even if he was given comparatively less, the Master still left him with a huge amount of wealth—because the Master did see enough potential to expect him to do *something* with what he was given.

We are almost at the end of our liturgical year, so we read these stories about end times, about keeping awake, alert, and active in anticipation of Jesus showing up and holding us accountable for what we've been doing with God's kingdom. Are we ready to show what we've done with what we've been given—for the sake of others, because after all, the slaves in the story were only managing what really belonged to the Master; they were working on his behalf, not their own. It doesn't always fall this way on the calendar, but this year, we read this story right before Thanksgiving, when we are invited to take a day not to compare or to compete but to celebrate with gratitude what we have been given...even if we start shopping for more at 4AM...The third slave misses out on the joy the Master intended because he couldn't see the abundance that was entrusted to him; he fears the Master will be harsh and demanding, even though the Master has been generous to him. In this season of gratitude and anticipation, may we see how abundantly we've been gifted and may we boldly use the gifts entrusted to us to extend far beyond us—since that's why God has given them to us in the first place.