

The Rt. Rev. Gordon Light

I was listening to my radio in the early morning about ten days ago, and caught a little of one of this year's Massey lectures: they were given by human rights lawyer, Payam Akhavan. Originally from Iran, he came to Canada as a boy. Trained in Toronto and Harvard, he teaches at McGill University in the faculty of law, and has been worked for years as an international human rights lawyer. There are five lectures – I haven't listened to them all, but what I have heard is gripping. In the one I first caught, he mentioned how he was in Moscow for a week or so – during the days when the Soviet Union was crashing – the times were very lean there. He ate in the restaurant of the hotel he was staying in and was given the menu. When he ordered, the server said, "We don't have that. We have borscht." So he tried asking for something else. Same answer: "We don't have that. We have borscht." A few more inquiries brought the same response. So he said to the server – "Is there anything on this menu you do have apart from borscht?" "Nothing. We only have borscht." So he said, "Then why did you give me a menu if you only have borscht?" The server answered, "We want our customers to have a choice."

There is always a choice. Our choice might best be described in a question asked by poet Mary Oliver: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" Whether borscht or a full menu, whether little or much, we have a choice. It is the stuff of today's gospel reading.

Jesus tells us that the kingdom, the reign of God, can be compared to a man who sets out on a journey and leaves three slaves in charge of his property. His property consists of a number of talents. The Greek word is 'talanta' and it was a unit of wealth, money. To one is given five, to a second two, and to the last one.

Those who gathered for the Eucharist this past Wednesday explored this passage a little. Someone asked what a talent was worth. I couldn't remember, but ventured a day's wage or a year's wage. I went home and checked it out. I was way off – it was the largest coin of the Roman realm – worth 6000 denarii. A denarius was a day's wage. So when you start to do the math, essentially a talent is roughly the equivalent to winning Lotto 649 after the jackpot has multiplied over some weeks. One talent.

So we are not talking peanuts here. We are talking wealth of a kind no slave in Jesus' time would ever have seen, let alone be put in charge of. We are talking wealth few in **our** time would see (except perhaps the art collector who spent 450 million this past week to buy the Da Vinci painting: "Salvator Mundi"). But remember this is parable – a story that packs a punch – and exaggerations are allowed.

The first two slaves are delighted, and choose to trade their talents in order to create more wealth. They must have been wise, or at least – wily – investors, for they each doubled the fortune and presented their master with proceeds upon his return. The third slave makes a different choice. He buries the talent so it won't be lost. Caution and prudence? Or fear of the risk of losing it? The first two are rewarded – sharing in their master's wealth and given more responsibility. The third confronts the master: "I knew you were a harsh man reaping what you did not sow, gathering what you did not scatter. So I was afraid and hid the talent – here you can have it back." Brave soul. But he is rebuked, his revolt is squashed, his talent is given to the one who had most and he is thrown into the place of "outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth."

What could be fairer than that?

Except it doesn't seem fair, and it doesn't feel right, does it? (I checked Luke's parallel story, expecting a softer tone as Luke is often more forgiving. But no – in his telling, the third slave is not cast out. He is killed.) So what to do with this parable.

Some folk who have reflected on this have found in the third slave the image of Christ.

Audrey West (Lutheran NT Scholar):

“Viewed from (one) perspective, the parable exposes the challenges of faithfulness in a world dominated by power and wealth. The rich man has achieved his wealth at the expense of others—by “reaping where [he] did not sow, and scattering where [he] did not scatter seed.” (He didn't deny that he was a harsh man – in fact he seemed to revel in it.) The first two servants multiply his dishonesty. The third refuses to participate in this system of oppression, and for this refusal he is abandoned and condemned to a place of suffering.”

Jan Richardson (Methodist artist, poet and retreat leader):

“I find myself wondering, why is it that we most often read this passage as a judgment against the third servant and not against the man who has perpetuated an unjust system? Do we really think that the harsh and reportedly corrupt master of this parable represents God, who, after a period of absence, comes back prepared to throw out those who have not performed as expected? Do I really want to be like the first two servants, willing to participate in and perpetuate injustice?”

These comments seem to me to form legitimate ways of reflecting on the parable. If we explore this avenue, we could well see in the third slave the likeness of Jesus - who himself stood before the powers both of his people and Rome in the cause of the kingdom of God, and was cast into outer darkness, and murdered.

But there is another way of thinking about this, and it holds at least as much legitimacy. To hide or bury your talent is to take what matters most and lose it, stop it from growing. Hiding (like the garden story in which Adam says to God after eating the fruit of the tree – “I was afraid and I hid myself”) is about avoidance, choosing the path of least resistance.

Frederick Buechner (Presbyterian author)

“It seems to me that the one-talent man represents somebody who buried the richest treasure he had ...the most alive part of himself... He was never able to become who he might have been. I think the outer darkness the Master casts him into is not to be thought of so much as a punishment, as it is to be thought of as the inevitable consequence of what it means to bury your life. If you bury your life, you don't live your life. You don't meet other people who are alive. You are alone; you are in the dark. The point is not to perfect our particular gifts, or ourselves, but to quit hoarding ourselves from others, and instead step out in faith that we have been given all we need.”

Most good stories, and most parables, don't dictate only one interpretation or path to wisdom. What they do is put a choice before us.

Barbara and I were thinking together about this parable this week. And Barbara noted this: “We are given everything”. True. We are given creation – the air we breathe, life-giving waters, grasslands and forests, stars and moon and sun, each other. We have this common ‘wealth’ from the hands of a loving God. It is worth far more than 10 talents. An immense treasure. How do we invest in it, in each other? How do we give ourselves to it in ways that create life? “... what will you do with your one wild and precious life?”

We are also given a suffering earth. A suffering people.
We are given the work of justice, mercy and compassion to do.
Next week's gospel makes that clear. And again, that is worth far more than one or 2 or 5 or even 10,000 talents. It is what we are given in this life, a coin of infinite worth: it is a game-changer.

Nobody comes off well in this parable – not the master nor any of the servants. But that is not the point of the parable. The point of the parable is that we have a choice. No matter how we interpret the parable, we are asked to decide for or against the kingdom of God. If we lean towards a view that sees the first two servants as those prepared to risk their lives, then we are asked to choose to risk who **we** are and what we have for the sake of a kingdom that is above all centred in justice and mercy. That means aligning ourselves with those who are among the poor, or oppressed. If we lean towards a view that believes the third servant has a righteous cause, then the same choice applies. To speak truth to power (as the slave spoke to his master), to refuse to be compromised, is to accept that we may find ourselves in darkness. But remember that Jesus allowed himself to be cast into that very place. Jesus went to the place of outer darkness, the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, in order to set free the reign of God in every place, in every time. Jesus is the buried treasure unearthed in the Resurrection. This is where judgment turns into grace.

So Jesus, like Mary Oliver, is asking “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” And maybe Jesus is like the server who shows us a full menu, but tells us that the only thing that will feed us is borscht. I have to tell you, I really don't like borscht! Nor am I particularly fond of risk-taking or comfortable with speaking truth to power. But I think I know the choice in front of me. Amen.