

There was spirited debate this week at the Lakeview clergy text study about how to interpret the parable that Jesus tells today.

Some of us argued along the familiar lines suggested by Matthew's context, with God or Jesus being a wealthy master, poised to return someday with expectations of profitable return.

We are God's servants, entrusted with wild abundance--a talent was a ridiculous amount of money, fifteen to twenty years worth of wages--and the parable confronts us with questions like what we will do with it and what knowledge and what attitude--diligent faith or lazy fear--directs our decision-making.

Others of us, however, saw the master not as God but as The Man keeping us down, a harsh and greedy capitalist with suffocating expectations, the sinister poster child for the 1%.

In this reading, the third slave is the hero, refusing to play the corrupt game, following ethical best practice by safeguarding the money in the earth, and then being punished by the Man for doing the right thing...this third slave is Jesus, presenting a new way of doing business and, as a result, ending up on the cross, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It is testimony to the beauty and brilliance of the parable that after an hour of hashing it through, we left with the matter completely unresolved, and with more questions than answers.

That is what Jesus' parables are really designed to do.

They are not at all tidy little stories with a moral and one obvious meaning.

Jesus' parables do not simplify our understanding but complicate it; they don't give us easy answers, they take our easy answers away.

These stories are spiritual dynamite, planted deep in our brains to detonate and blow our safe assumptions to Kingdom Come...because that's one way that it does.

What if both sides of the clergy debate are correct?

Maybe the master in the parable is very clearly the Man keeping us down, a brutal, demanding, slave-holding tyrant as ruthlessly awful as the third slave says he is.

And that horrible master, says Jesus with a mischievous glimmer in his eye, is God.

God is Bernie Madoff; God is Al Capone.

This is so shocking, so counter-intuitive, such obviously indefensible theology that now you cannot help but listen, you cannot tear your stinging eyes away from this narrative car crash.

God, the slick and rapacious point man of a hundred pyramid schemes, entrusts five fortunes to one of his racketeers, two to another, one to another.

Then God slides off-stage, behind an impenetrable fog of cigar smoke and mirrors, until the end of the movie, when once again the henchmen are standing in front of the Boss, who demands a report on the operation.

Lackey number one, the suck-up, steps forward immediately: you gave me five, I bring you ten.
Well done, good and faithful 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!

Thug number two feels much better about things, and excitedly says, you gave me two, I bring you four!

He gets the same approving smile and kisses on the cheeks while number three cowers in the corner.

"I didn't do nothing illegal, Boss.

"I was a good boy.

"I went to church and said my prayers and followed the rules and I didn't hurt nobody and I upheld the family honor and protected your reputation and here's your money."

And God's face twists into disappointment, and God throws the moneybag to the first guy with disgust, and the careful, conscientious choir boy is sent to sleep with the fishes.

Don't go looking in this parable for a just and merciful God; this is a bizarre burlesque, told not to the general public but to the disciples in private, to shock them out of their normal thought patterns and slap them upside the head with the reality that one day they are going to have to stand before God and give an accounting.

In the incomprehensible economy of Kingdom Come, God's crazy pyramid scheme of irresponsible grace, there is no possibility of loss, no risk other than taking no risks, no failure except fear.

What are you doing with your fortune--using it or hoarding it, buying or burying?

Are you working with what God has given you, or are you safeguarding it because you are afraid of an impossibility?

These are the questions asked in advance of God's church, which has been given only one Talent.

We have only one treasure, and the truth is, we buried Him.

We banished him to the outer darkness at the cross, sent his body to the bottom of the river.

Now Jesus, the Fortune that God entrusted to us, is hidden treasure.

Matthew's next haunting story will turn us again, revealing that he is hidden in the hungry, the sick, the prisoner, the neighbor in desperate need, the bottom of society, and eventually God the mafia boss will want to know how we treated the family.

Jesus is hidden in bread and wine, in battered hopes and broken community, in the crowds and among the criminals on a cross.

Will we be found faithful or fearful?

Do we share Jesus, invest him in the world, or do we hoard him, "my personal Savior," bury him again in an airtight cocoon of cautious religion and carefully constructed doctrine, cloak him in respectability to try to hide our embarrassment with a Story that doesn't add up authored by a God who we just know should have better standards of behavior?

Today, Preston Durek joins Jesus at the bottom of the river.

We bury him too, in the waters of baptism, not in fear but in the crazy confidence of faith that nothing is lost, that outer darkness is in fact the place where salvation actually happens, and that in the hands of Jesus, who struggles and suffers and suffocates, is the safest place for him to be.

Today we bury Preston with our Treasure, and we wait with bated breath to see what the God-the-Father will do next.