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St. John's Episcopal Church
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Pentecost XXIV (Proper 28A, Matthew 25:14-30)

OK, so maybe this is a don't-act-like-this-parable. I mean, parables have underlying meanings – they're not exactly analogies, they're not simply teaching stories, but they're supposed to point to deeper truths.

It would be too easy, too facile, to assign the role of the landowner to Jesus, or to God. But... that doesn't work for me. He is described as a fairly despotic character – reaping a harvest that he hasn't planted – and he is a character who has incited fear in his slaves. This is not the Jesus I know, not the God I know.

Then there's the final punishment – casting the fearful slave into the outer darkness. Again: This is not the Jesus of compassion, the God of mercy.

So I think it's pretty hard to justify Jesus being the landowner. Or God.

Then there's the stewardship sermon... A preacher might use this as an example of reaping abundance, or a preacher might take the word "talent" to mean inherent ability rather than the Greek word which actually means money. Lots and lots of money. One talent was worth a million dollars. So we're talking big bucks here. And in the parable it could be that Jesus is using hyperbole, for I doubt that any landowner would have been giving slaves millions and millions of dollars. But in any case – I really don't think this is a stewardship parable.

Some preachers would use it as a prosperity parable – follow me, do what I say, invest your money, and you'll be rich.

Some preachers would use it to justify a capitalistic system in which we are required to work hard to produce results for our boss or our employer, but I don't think Jesus is out-and-out saying that he prefers capitalism over socialism. In fact in the next parable, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats Jesus quite explicitly says that we are to *share* wealth, not hoard it or use it only for our own benefit: "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was naked and you gave me clothing."

So what's this preacher going to do with this parable?

Well, again: I'm going to treat it as a don't-act-like-this-parable and assume, for the moment, that Jesus is admonishing us not to be greedy and want five talents for every five we're given, but perhaps Jesus wants us instead to be cautious. The landowner didn't *lose* anything when the third slave buried the talent and then returned it to the landowner. And he could have lost *everything* that the other slaves had if they'd made bad investments. (And then again, and I'm speaking parenthetically with yet another possibility, perhaps Jesus is telling us that we need to take *risks* – that to follow Jesus is risky behavior! But that's perhaps best left for another sermon...) Close parenthesis.

Maybe the third slave represents resistance to harsh authority? Maybe the third slave is actually the one who took the greater risk by refusing to submit to a harsh landowner.

And here's another question: What did the landowner do with all that money he'd gained from the work of his slaves? The parable doesn't say, for example, "And the wealthy landowner gave all that he had to his people, freed his slaves, and lived happily and compassionately ever after." Nope, doesn't say that.

And what happened to the first two slaves, anyway? I don't read anything about the landowner giving them a portion of his profit... "I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Sounds like the landowner's going to make them work even harder and that will make *him* happy.

Our responsibility is to build the Kingdom of God where all are fed, all are healthy; to care for the poor, to welcome the stranger, and to be merciful to those who have no power and no voice. Our responsibility in the Kingdom of God is to call out those who exploit, those who oppress, those who denigrate the inherent value of *all* God's children. The third slave accuses the landowner of immorality – the landowner is taking what is not his. And so the slave might think, "Hmmmm, this guy's ruthless. I'm not going to take any chances with his money." And then he's slapped down because the landowner wanted more and more money!

And the slave was cast out into the darkness. One of our congregation aptly put it on Wednesday. "Well, at least he was free."

So what do you do with your talents?

Amen.