THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

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DARK GOD

untangling a dim view of a loving God

by Drew Downs

I struggle with a straight reading of any of Jesus's parables which seem to suggest that God is a master and owner of slaves. It is theologically troubling and deeply inconsistent with the character of the God of Love. One who chose Abram and Sarai because of their *independence*, who encouraged Jacob to literally wrestle with the divine, who kept offering people the choice to follow. Freedom and protection are central to our tradition of faith.

Earlier parables focused on our relationship with God and one another — not as a thing to be enforced by the whip, but as one's commitment to something worth pursuing, something filled with joy, dignity, and hope. This makes the Parable of the Talents a challenge, because it tangles up the things we might use as a shorthand for "good" and "bad". But we aren't in the dark on God. And knowing who Jesus is, helps lighten our vision to untangle each thread.

ORDINARY TIME

2026

WHAT'S GOING ON

"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today". -Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Abundance and Welcome

Our fall giving campaign has begun and the theme this year is Plenty Good Room. It reminds me of my Dad's church in Midland, Michigan, which was called Holy Family—perfect for a new motto: "This family has a place for you." They put it on the sign and people took them at their word. And the church became more welcoming and vibrant. There wasn't just room for people, there was plenty of good room for them. For artists and social workers and teachers and executives and chemists and musicians.

It can be difficult during a season of hardship to think abundantly. To think of having what we need. It becomes so easy to slip into scarcity thinking. What we *don't* have, or *used* to have. But the thing about scarcity thinking is that it never ends. There will never be enough. That's why ingenuity and creative thinking requires an abundant mindset—we need to see what's possible and believe that we can make it happen, with a little help.

We heard a lot about abundance and especially welcome at convention this last weekend. About our neighbors in and outside the church who deserve our radical welcome, a sense of true inclusion as children of God. People of faith and devotion. Who are eager to learn and serve and is just as worthy of being the face of our faith as any of us.

Our is a generous and radically welcoming church. May we honor the abundance that comes from that diversity and grace, the joy that comes from that kinship, and the love that may be found in all of it.

With love,
Drew+

ORDINARY TIME

2026

FOR SUNDAY

Proper 28A

November 15, 2026

Collect

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

Reading

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, "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.'"

Reflection

This is a tricky parable. Here's why: 1) Hebrew law forbids charging interest, so the master's demand violates a God-given command and 2) Jesus teaches that the first (on earth) shall be last (in heaven) and vice versa, but here, the master suggests the opposite. A straight reading of the parable gives the reader a thorny relationship to existing teaching. But contextually, that feels like the reading Jesus is intending. I suspect that we are supposed to hold all of this in tension, frankly. I can't imagine Jesus would tell a parable like this (his penultimate teaching, btw) and be like, ignore the way this violates essential teachings to talk about growing money for God!

One of the other important points is that a "talent" is a sum of money worth about 15 years worth of wages. The risk to the least trusted slave is enormous precisely because there is no way to make that back. It is nearly impossible to overstate the stakes Jesus sets for the slaves in this parable and how the relationships of the slaves to the master are revealed throughout. Consider, too, how important the concept of relationship has been to all of the Jerusalem teachings. These are people who know each other.

The tension inherent to this passage gives us some really fascinating interpretive options. I think they can each be "right". . . if we remain committed to the context of doing work now, of being the light of Christ, and serving "the least of these."