



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

## ***"Parables with a Twist" - The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost - 11/15/2020***

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father and the Lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Since our parents died, my sister and I see less than less of each other. She actually used to come and visit my parents and my parents lived with us, so that was how I got to see her. But since they're no longer with us, and we both work full time, we just don't make the time to see one another. And finally, we got so irritated with that fact that we decided we needed to do a video call each Friday. So each Friday, she and I find like half an hour and we share what's going on in our lives, the little and the big.

This past Friday I was telling her that I was going to preach on the Parable of the Talents. My sister's not Christian, so she said, "What's a parable?" I said, "Well, that's a story that Jesus would use to kind of share something or reveal a hidden truth." And she said, "Oh, like Akbar and Birbal." I was like, "Oh my gosh, I completely forgot about Akbar and Birbal." Akbar was a Muslim emperor in the Mogul Dynasty in India, and he had a wiseman who was a Hindu named Birbal. These stories of Akbar and Birbal are famous, especially among children in India.

When we were growing up, my father would tell us these stories. I couldn't remember a single one, so I said, "Do you remember any of them?" She says, "Well, yeah, I remember two," and she told me both of them. And I'm going to tell you one. If you're interested in the second one, email me. But here's the first one that she told me and I think it's my favorite.

It's about a time when a man came into the Emperor's court and he challenged the Emperor. He said that he was going to be able to stump Birbal the Wiseman. And if he did, would the Emperor give him a large sum of money? The emperor consented. So they called Birbal in and the man said to him, "I speak five languages fluently. Can you tell me which one is my mother tongue?" So Birbal asked him to speak all five languages and he did, and indeed he was fluent.

So Birbal thought about it and he said, "I'll tell you what, why don't you stay in the palace? Stay here, have a wonderful dinner with us, enjoy the evening, and tomorrow I will tell you what your native tongue is," and the man agreed. So that night they had a sumptuous feast with everything laid out. The man was happy.

He went to bed and in the morning there came a big bucket of cold water that was poured on him. The man got out of bed and swore in his mother tongue.

I think the cool thing about these stories is their appeal is that there's a twist to them, right? There's something that you don't expect to happen happens, and it reveals a gem. What's interesting about parables is there's never just one twist. They're stories that tease you and entice you to look twice and then look away and then look again and then look away and maybe spend some time away and then come again. And it's always revealing something new.

What's the twist to you on this parable of this morning? A man plans a long trip. He summons his three slaves and he gives to each one of them, part of his fortune fund. By the way, the sum of money that is offered to each one, a talent - well, a talent was actually like 75 to 90 pounds of silver. It was meant to represent currency, but clearly not pocket change. It was a large sum of money, about 10 to 20 years wages' worth. So if you do the math, we're talking about today, about a half a million or a million dollars. We'll just make it easy for us and we'll call it a million dollars per talent.

So now you have these men who have a large sum of money that they're working with. Then years later, maybe even decades, the master returns and he wants an accounting from his slaves of what they did with his nest egg. Have they been good stewards with what was entrusted to them?

So the first slave takes \$5 million, trades, and manages to make it 10. The guy with the 2 million, well, he made it to 4 million. But the third slave simply took the million bucks, threw it in a paper bag and put it in the mattress, waited for his master to come back. Untouched for decades, hands the money to him.

So where's the twist? Well, I came up with, oh, I don't know, about five or six or seven of them, but I won't bore you with all of them. I'll bore you with three. So perhaps the twist to you is that the word for the large sum of money is talent. Right? And that has that double meaning for us, that it means to be not just about our resources, but our God given abilities, what are we doing with them? Are we giving them away so that they exponentially increase or are we hoarding them and not giving them away and not using them for others? Are we, are we using our talents or are we burying them?

But here's a twist within the twist. I wondered if other languages have the same double meaning. So it turns out that our English word for talent is actually the Greek word transliterated and just spelled out. The Greek is talénto. So the Greek means to bear weight or something that has weight, like a large currency. I asked some of our talented congregation members who spoke different languages fluently, what did their Bible say? And they were so generous with their talents and I didn't even have to threaten them with a bucket of cold water.

So in German, Krista Albrecht, she looked at her German Bible and she discovered that the word for talent in English would actually in German switch back and forth. And it would mean either weight or money. Regina Lawler, who also speaks German, said that the amount of weight that was indicated was a hundred pounds. And Caren Froelich (sp?), also another German speaker told me that even though in her translation, it said silver coins, she really understood it to mean giftedness.

What about Spanish? Sylvia Carlson said that in Spanish it's actually the same as in English, talent as the currency, but also talent as a special gift. So for example, if you are really good at singing, like our amazing choir is, in Spanish, you would say they're very talentosa. What about African languages? Anag Ikan (sp) looked it up in both Efik and Igbo. And they just simply took the word talent and shoved it in there. And it was this connotation that actually it was meant to be traded in marketplaces. And so she said that neither one translated the word into the word for money in Efik or Igbo, but it was meant to be understood as something that you would give in a marketplace.

Barry Lawler went to his Afrikaans Bible and in a very Barry Lawler, simple kind of way said it says gold coins. All of that is to say that this understanding of the text as having to do with your talents and giftedness may be limited to certain languages. What does it mean that other Christians speaking other languages do not see it the same way because of a translation issue? That's the power and the crazy of parables. It just is slippery and refuses to be pinned down.

And certainly you've experienced that if you've spent Wednesday nights with us, as we were with our sister synagogue, Temple Beth El, and together, we have been under the tutelage of Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, who is a Jewish New Testament scholar. That's right, I said Jewish New Testament scholar. And together we have all been studying the scriptures. We've been looking at the Book of Genesis and we've been looking at the parables together, and it's been fascinating to see it from multiple visions and multiple ways of thinking in multiple religious communities.

And what I've noticed about Dr. Levine is that she loves to take parables and ask questions. Lots of questions. Like the parable of the prodigal son. You remember that one, where there's two brothers who are at home and the younger one decides to take his inheritance and runs off and squanders it, and then comes back hoping to just receive a little bit of help, and is welcomed with open arms by the father who gives them the best. And the older brother gets jealous and angry. And you remember all those stories. Dr. Levine asked, where is the mother?

One of the participants of Sharing Stories, emailed us, the clergy, and told us how much she's been enjoying our class. She said that she started sharing this way of wrestling with the parables with her family and her son was reading the

Parable of the Talents. And he asked this next question, which is my second twist, where is the fourth servant? The one who takes the talents, trades it, and then loses everything. It made me think, perhaps that question actually reveals that we laud and magnify servant number one and servant number two. Not because they tried, but because they succeeded. And what does that then say about what we think God desires?

Remember these parables aren't meant to tell you literally what the kingdom of God is to be, rather these parables are meant to help us compare and contrast what the kingdom of heaven is like and what the kingdom of heaven may not be like. And I was thinking about this because I was thinking, does God judge us on our successes and our failures? Or is there through Christ a more excellent way? That is the power of not being afraid and simply doing that, which you're called to do. Maybe that fourth servant would be lauded, no matter the outcome. Is that the way that you see the kingdom of heaven?

I want to give you one more twist and I promise I'll stop. In this parable, what makes me twitch and itch is that dialogue between the master and the third servant. It's sort of chilling if you believe that the master is representational of God, because God who has an abundance of resources, and is truly very generous and all that. Is that master doing the same thing that God does? Goes away expecting servants to be good stewards and then comes back to receive an accounting.

But here's the problem. When that master comes back and talks to that third servant, did you hear what he said? He said to the master, "I know you're a harsh man, reaping where you do not sow and gathering seeds you didn't scatter. So here, I'm just going to give you what's yours." And the master does not refute it.

Apparently this man who has a fortune to give and to spend has been exploiting others and making his fortune by his rapacious dealings. And it's evident by the way he treats that third slave who gives him back all that is his. He throws him out to the outer darkness where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth. And we hear this as a punishment. Except my question to you, my twist is where do you expect the crucified God to be except in the outer darkness, where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth?

Do you know, during the pandemic dentists have seen a huge increase in patients that are coming in. Why? Because we're all grinding our teeth and we're chipping it. And you cannot tell me that during this pandemic, as we weep and we gnash our teeth, that God is not with us. God and Christ is with us in all circumstances. And why I love this twist in the parable is that it's actually saying that as you face your daily problems, whether you have to figure out how to invest lots and lots of talents, whether you have to figure out what's going to put food on your table the next time, and whether you have to figure out what to do in the next hour, as you face every single choice that you are making, what this

tells me is that you are called to be yourself and make the best possible decision that you can make and not be afraid of the consequences.

All three servants made decisions to the best of their judgment. I hope we think about this as we have so many decisions that are public, that we're making. Whether or not to wear masks, what to do for Thanksgiving, who we voted for, who we're going to trust. All of these decisions that lead to judgment from others and in which we judge others. And yet, as that servant did, that servant acted out of his convictions and God did not abandon him.

It's as a friend says to me often, whenever I'm confused and I don't know what to do and I second guess myself, she says, "You be you because that's what God expects you to do." May you find the gift of being you enough as we all wait. May you find comfort in the decisions you're making to the best of your abilities and may you know that whatever path you take, there is nowhere God won't be.

Amen.

[End of Recording]