Thirty-Third Sunday of the Year, Cycle A

St. Mary’s, 2020

While I not only appreciate

But regularly celebrate Christian liturgy in general

And its various readings and preaching

As essentially a word-centered

narrative event

there are sometimes it would be useful

to have access to a projector

or video screen

during the preaching to help make a point.

This is one of those moments.

The point revolves around a famous animal image

Created by an unnamed illustrator in late 19th century Germany.

From one perspective

The figure appears to be a duck

Yet from another angle, it seems to be a rabbit.

You can easily find the image on the internet

By searching “duck or rabbit illusion” search.[[1]](#endnote-2)

While employed by various authors,

It was made famous by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein

who used it to illustrate two different ways of seeing.

He labeled these “seeing that” and “seeing as”

And the dawning awareness

That it is not just a duck but also a rabbit,

This change in perspective,

Is what he called “noticing an aspect”

since nothing has physically changed in the illustration

nor in our physiology of seeing

but only in our perception.

The reason for this excursion into ducks and rabbits

Illusions and Wittgenstein

Seeing and not seeing

Is because the meaning of the Word of God in general

And today’s readings in particular

May not always be as obvious or transparent

As they first appear.

Today’s gospel, for example, is not only quite familiar

But the very word “talent”

As in the popular “America’s got Talent” show

Entered our vocabulary from this ancient usage

As a form of currency

But now means a special gift or skill.

Consequently, this gospel is often interpreted

As a condemnation of those who do not use their skills

Who bury their light under a bushel basket (Mt. 5:14-15)

And who take the easy way out

Either in worldly ways or the call to holiness.

A closer reading of this gospel parable in context, however,

Could provide a radical change of perspective

And reveal that maybe the 3rd slave was not a bum

That the Master was the true slacker

And the servant with the “burying gene” is really the hero.

The celebrated preacher and teacher Eugene Lowry

Suggests that one key way to shift perspective on a reading

Is to look for what he calls the “oops” in the text.

And todays gospel has a multitude of them.

Here are a few of key oddities Matthew serves up for us.[[2]](#endnote-3)

First, no place in the parable are the slave’s told to invest the money

The Master simply gives it and goes away.

Second, these are huge amounts of money

Some estimate that 1 talent is worth about $1.25 million

So 5 talents is a whopping 6.25 million

Which the returning master’s considers a trifle

When noting the first slaves were

“faithful in small matters.”

Third, according to some scholars,

the highest legal interest rate allowed then was about 12%

though in reality, many lenders of the time

charged as much as 50%

and the only reasonable explanation for 2 servants

to “double” their master’s holdings

was probably through such loan sharking.

Fourth, Jewish teaching often speaks of the wisdom

Of burying money in the ground as a way to safeguard it[[3]](#endnote-4)

Finally, the Master gives no indication when or even if

He is coming back; he could have just moved to another place.

When compiling these oddities

And gathering these multiple “oopses”

One can come to a very different interpretation of this gospel

Rather than a cautionary tale about hiding your talents,

A parable about potential payoffs from taking big risks,

Or a gospel admonition not to displease God,

Masquerading as a pre-Christian billionaire,

Maybe it is a more subtle teaching:

About resistance to mercenary business deals

About whistleblowing in the face of unethical practices

About safeguarding another’s assets, even livelihood

Without benefit to ourselves

And maybe even about the cost of integrity.

The Master certainly is no “God” or “Jesus” figure

And as one commentator suggested

He is really the lazy one in this tale

Living off other people’s work on his behalf …

Punishing those who do not increase his wealth

While he’s metaphorically lounging on some

Mediterranean beach.

And then there’s the third slave

The one too often pummeled in our preaching

As an apathetic ne’er-do-well

Whose action and very person has “loser” branded all over it.

What if he was the pious Jew

Who followed traditional ethical teaching,

Who followed the Torah that forbade lending money at interest,[[4]](#endnote-5)

Who stood up to the 1% of his day

Who regularly profited from payday loans to the poor,

who planted the money in the ground that the Bible teaches

is ultimately owned by God,[[5]](#endnote-6)

investing in that sacred arena where the poor plant and sew

rather than in some unjust economic system.

And what does he get for his honesty? His integrity? His ethics?

Well, if this parable is to be extracted

From the whole of the gospel narrative

He sounds like he got fired, exiled, humiliated and erased.

Moral of the story: denouncing injustice is dangerous …

But maybe there is more.

If we reinsert this parable into the whole of the gospel of Matthew

We see that it is the second in a series of three tales

That come at the very end of this gospel

Comprising the final teachings of the earthly Jesus.

The previous parable, we heard last week

Was the story of the wise and foolish virgins

A cautionary tale of staying awake and being prepared.

Makes me wonder whether our treasure-burying servant

From today’s gospel

Had managed a chat with some of the foolish virgins

And learned from their mistake

And, unlike the two other slaves,

Actually did anticipate the return of their Master.

And then there is next week’s narrative

The final wisdom tale in the gospel of Matthew –

The last judgment instruction with its famous heavenly divide

Between sheep and goats

Between those who had cared for the least:

The hungry, the naked, the sick and imprisoned

And those who did not.

In my imagination

The earth-banking slave

Who refused to exploit the poor through shady loans

With exorbitant interest rates

Was certainly on the side of the blessed …

But maybe even more …

That this humiliated outcast,

At least temporarily relegated to the region of darkness

A place of wailing and suffering

Is an apt Christ figure,

Whose public ministry on behalf of outcasts

Whose dedication to the marginalized and powerless

Condemned him as well

To the darkness of Golgotha

And the suffering of the Cross.

A number of years ago I heard a segment from the

“This I believe” project that aired on national public radio.

It was entitled: “I believe in Integrity”[[6]](#endnote-7)

The author wrote: I believe in integrity. It’s a belief that’s tested in those gut-wrenching moments when conflicting values pull me in opposite directions.

Back in the early 1980s, I was in a training session for mental health workers who were volunteering to provide counseling to cancer patients who had a terminal diagnosis. Each of us was given 16 index cards and asked to write on each the names of people, abilities, things, and values we hold dear. In the course of our imagined cancer, we had to surrender cards or somewhat abruptly have them taken from us.

At the very end I only had two cards: One read “Integrity” and the other read “My Family.” How could I choose between these two; such a choice was unfair and impossible. My initial thought was that I would give up my integrity, because I love my daughters and would want their comfort at my death. But then, I would realize that dying without integrity might be worse. I drifted back and forth, not wanting to choose. In the end, I uneasily kept the integrity card because I reasoned that if I lost my family, integrity would still be possible; if I lost my integrity, my life would be without value.

Maintaining our integrity

As human beings

As Christians

As Children of the Light, as St. Paul calls us today,

Is never easy …

And maybe even less so in these post-election days.

So, in these challenging time we commit ourselves to a renewed sense of integrity

And summon the spirit of that great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr

A sense of serenity in that struggle as we pray:

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change

Courage to change the things I can,

And wisdom to know the difference”[[7]](#endnote-8)

through Christ our Lord, Amen.

1. <https://www.illusionsindex.org/i/duck-rabbit> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Richard Swanson is a helpful resource here at <https://provokingthegospel.wordpress.com/2017/11/13/a-provocation-twenty-fourth-sunday-after-pentecost-november-19-2017-matthew-2514-30/>; also Stan Duncan at <http://jubileejusticeeconomics.blogspot.com/2014/11/the-parable-of-faithful-servant.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. E.g., Tractate *Bava Metzia* 42 in the Talmud. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ex 22:20-30 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Leviticus 25:23-28 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. https://thisibelieve.org/essay/25667/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. Justin Kaplan, ed., *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations,* 17th ed. (2020), s.v. “Reinhold Niebuhr.” [↑](#endnote-ref-8)