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)