Last week's sermon – called "Hope for the Long Haul" – included the understanding that we are all lifelong learners of the Way of Jesus. Jesus showed a propensity for causing people to rethink much about what they believed, and what they thought were immutable truths.

I've been a Christian since I was baptized as an infant. But there have been moments when something has caused my understanding of that identity to shift dramatically.

- Being introduced to Liberation theologies in college and seminary led me to reading the Hebrew Scriptures and teachings of Jesus through the lens of God's preferential option for the poor, dispossessed and marginalized;
- Delving into historical criticism of how the bible came to be during seminary caused the Sunday School education I received to break down and be re-formed with a more mature understanding.
- Finally, a new process began three weeks ago in the meeting I shared with you all between myself and Pastor Meredith, and her interpretation of the Wedding Banquet Parable – which was quite different from the traditional take that I offered in my sermon.

Here, in real time, is your opportunity to watch your pastor work through a new understanding for how to approach biblical interpretation. Are you all okay with that?

Meredith said that she gleaned most of her thoughts about the wedding banquet parable from a theologian named Simon Cross. Cross has a weekly post on substack entitled “Progressive reflections on the lectionary.” In his article about today’s lection, Cross attributes the Parable of the Talents as the first to help him read Jesus’ stories upside down. What does he mean by that?

A classical way of reading Jesus’ parables that feature a king or a landowner or a master is to assume that this character of power automatically represents God. When that assumption is made, those trying to understand the point of the parable then must make everything else fit into their understanding of God.

It would be perfectly reasonable to continue the thread from last week’s parable of the foolish and wise bridesmaids, to say that if the oil kept in reserve was like the faith we keep within us then the “talents” in today’s parable are like faith that we use in the world. The more we use it, the more it spreads. But, when we hide our faith – “bury it in the ground” – it bears no fruit and we have wasted it. For most, this is the classic way of interpreting the parable. And in our bible study Wednesday morning, we found many reasons why this was an appropriate approach to understanding it.

The problem with the parable Donna read comes when the third servant says to the master, “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid…” and then the

master berates the man for sharing his feelings and then acts exactly in the manner the man was afraid of by taking all of his money away, calling him "worthless," and then throwing the man into the wretched place of outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And to top it off, there's the maxim the master proclaims that "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." Now I ask you my friends, does this jibe with your understanding of who God is? Does this correlate with the one who used his great sermon to state, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."
That does NOT compute.

I'm convinced that Jesus intentionally made this parable about money – because of the unjust systems the desire to make more inflicts on those who profit the most from it and those it wantonly exploits. As Simon Cross writes, "Although, of course, capitalism is a modern economic system, and the economics of the first century were markedly different, the parallel maps over well. The justification of wealth inequality, the lionisation of industry over compassion, serves the needs of the system and the powerful or wealthy ones who benefit

from it the most to keep the poorest striving. It is because of their labours, after all, that wealth is generated."

(https://simonjcross.substack.com/p/progressive-reflections-on-the-lectionary-c3d?r=5utl52&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web)

Let's measure the sequence of events through the third slave's utterance against his so-called benefactor: "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid...."

Who is it that is generating the income in this story? It is the servants. The man has set his servants to work while he ... goes on a journey. A vacation? Going out to reap where he did not sow?? We don't know. All we know is that he has compelled *slaves/servants* to go out and make him a profit. What choice did they have?

The Hebrew scriptures were rife with an ethic that money was not supposed to become an instrument through which the wealthy accumulated greater wealth by taking advantage of the vulnerable.

Perhaps it seems charitable for the master to give his slaves the opportunity to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" with this experiment of trading talents to make more talents ... and we could say how great it was that he allowed the

ones who did what he asked to “enter the joy of their master and be put in charge of many things.” Bully for the successful ones?!?
But will they stay in those positions? What happens the first time whatever they are in charge of “fails” in the master’s eyes? What happens when they don’t scratch their master’s back the way he wants them too? Their position seems tenuous, at best.

The third slave voiced his fear of the harshness of the master for a reason! This is NOT a system promoting justice and equity - it is only rewarding those who perform as the master demands.

From a spiritual point of view, Jesus was aware that the religious system of his time had painted God in this light – ie. God favors those who are pure and righteous and damns those who err. But it is clear through Jesus’ messaging throughout the gospels that this is ***not*** the true identity of the One who sent him.

All of the parables have subversive meanings - and the way to think about them is that if the reading we are offered seems to uphold the iniquities of wealth inequality, or if they seem to venerate the powerful, then we are reading them through the wrong lens. These texts sometimes need to be turned upside down to get at their true meaning.

In this sense, the third slave serves as a whistleblower, calling out not just the bullying behavior of his master, but the injustice of the whole economic system. He wouldn't participate in it any longer even if that meant losing his "job" (I'm not sure how much of a job being a slave/servant was then?). Rather than continuing to be a cog in someone else's machine, he chose to be an outcast. This slave is an exemplar of courage for us – even in his deep fear about the repercussions of not doing what the master wanted, and telling the master precisely why he wouldn't, he did it anyway. He could not stand to endure that toxic environment any longer. Yes, he was cast out into a liminal space. But isn't that the place where Jesus meets so many?

As Cross writes, "change often appears, first, as disruption. That's how we break through the defended position of stasis. The arrival of the divine kin(g)dom doesn't come by our adaptation to, or acceptance of, injustice, but through having the courage to create alternative possibilities."

There are times within our own lives when we have to make a decision whether to follow the proscribed practices of whatever system we are in, or to depart from it. I imagine that each of you can summon an example or two from your own lives – from being present while someone tells a patently offensive joke to standing up against standard practices that go against your religious or moral convictions. It dawned on me early this morning that this is a story about divestment. (See, this parable is affecting me in real time!) In the best way he

knew, the man chose to no longer invest in his master's unethical practices. Each of our denominations has, over the course of time, found reasons to withdraw their investments from companies and corporations who are tied up in activities that we have deemed go against Christian ethics. The funds we withdraw may or may not make a big difference against the company's overall portfolio, but sharing that witness with each of its congregant members, as well as the general public, can shine a light on how the practices stand against what we believe. And if enough people begin to withdraw their support to cause the profits to wane, the company will be forced to rethink their practices.

For Jesus to shine a light on the slave in this story who stood up against the well-funded powerful master is a witness to how important it is for us to speak up and act out whether or not it seems like we have the clout to do so. Who knows? Maybe one of the other slaves would eventually have enough of the demeaning practices of the master and choose to join the original one in standing up for what he knew was right. I suppose that's how the kin-dom of God makes itself visible.

As I reflected on Cross' interpretation, it seemed to make even more sense that this may have been Jesus' intent by telling this parable … for he, himself, took the paradigm of the world in which he was living (death to those who stood against the unjust powers-that-be) and through the power of resurrection created a mighty alternative.

And that seems like a good place to pause this conversation as we prepare for next week's festival Sunday of the Reign of Christ. I imagine we'll pick up from where we left off today 🙂