

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Matthew 25:14-30

In you, O Lord, have we taken refuge; for the sake of your name, lead us and guide us.¹ *Amen.*

Last week's parable of the bridesmaids immediately precedes today's parable of the talents, and, just as last Sunday's lesson was not about oil or lamps or marriage, neither is today's Gospel about journeys or investing or enslavement. Rather, in both stories, Jesus draws on imagery of institutions common to his listeners and deploys hyperbole to rattle loose fresh perspectives and to provoke more faithful, day-by-day living. Rhetorically, Matthew arranges these stories within a *chiasmus*, that X-shaped structure – A-B-c-c-B-A – reiterating pairs of related ideas from fresh angles, with new perspectives. In chapters 24 and 25, Jesus establishes constancy and loyalty to God's reign as our essential faithfulness ... there's your topic sentence, hear it again: *Jesus establishes constancy and loyalty to God's reign as our essential faithfulness.*

As chapter 24 begins, we find Jesus and his disciples leaving the Jerusalem temple.² The disciples point out to Jesus the Temple's marvels, prompting this soliloquy that continues clear through today's Gospel and next week's appointment, as well.³ In response to their wonderment, Jesus declares, "Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."⁴ Understandably concerned about this news, the disciples approach him that evening and ask: *So, uh, can you* "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming?"⁵ Jesus responds with warnings of the persecutions his followers will face;⁶ warnings of the "desolating sacrilege" that will come to the Temple;⁷ and warnings of the false messiahs and false prophets "who will ... produce great omens to lead [the elect astray]."⁸

In that chapter's penultimate section, Jesus shifts from describing the end-times, to urging the faithful's more immediate readiness: "For [in] those days [of Noah] before the flood [they were marrying and giving in marriage] ... and they knew nothing until the [waters] came and swept them away ... Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."⁹ Finally, as the chapter concludes, Jesus enjoins the disciples' loyalty with the story of a slave entrusted with his master's possessions, warning that "the master of that slave will [return] on a day when he does not expect and at an hour that he does not know."¹⁰

This chiasmus begins with *Idea A*: Jesus' apocalyptic vision in verses 4-35; continues with *Idea B*: the call to readiness in verses 36-44; and, then, *Idea C*: the slave-master story in verses 45-51. Reading within this intentional form, realize that Jesus does not propose God as *Goodfellas'* Tommy DeVito, warning us that God is going to chop us into little pieces¹¹ – of course not ... though check verse 51 and be sure *that's exactly how it reads.*¹² Rather, the sensationalism helps us to recognize **the judgments are rhetorical devices intending to teach us that our lives – in**

this age, in this moment – have consequences for God’s reign. In the here and now, we have choices to make, and those choices make a difference to ourselves, to one another, and to God.

Chapter 25 reopens the chiasmus and repeats the domestic imagery of *Idea B*, this time in the parable of the ten bridesmaids. Jesus concludes the first story, “Therefore, you must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour,”¹³ and this parable ends with a nearly identical claim: “Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”¹⁴ In a chiasmus the reiterated ideas will differ slightly from the originals; therefore, in addition to identifying resonances in the form’s coupled stories, we also look for distinctions between (for example) the two women of Chapter 24 who grind meal together,¹⁵ and those of this parable.

In Chapter 24, the “taken” and the “left behind” both have little agency in determining their fate. They are not unfaithful, exactly; instead, they tend their daily tasks without any sense of an approaching fulfillment. If we continue with the *Goodfellas*’ recasting, this is Karen Friedman at the beginning of the film, a mostly naïve neighborhood girl who falls for the wrong guy, and is not – *yet* – complicit in his crimes.¹⁶

In Chapter 25, however, the bridesmaids have the wedding to orient them. The wise are prepared and enter the banquet when that glad time comes,¹⁷ while last-minute scurrying for oil distracts the foolish, and they miss their opportunity.¹⁸ See, the wise bridesmaids have faithfully aimed their daily labor [here, managing oil for their lamps] toward a purpose greater than their situation [here, the wedding party]. Yet, for the foolish bridesmaids, their busy-ness *becomes its own end*, distracting them from the groom’s arrival – maybe not so different from Henry Hill’s frantic paranoia near the end of *Goodfellas*, when the police helicopters follow him all day as he and Karen roll from payphone to payphone in their stretch Cadillac, yet, rather than changing his priorities or routine or wiping the white powder from his upper lip, he goes about his business, picks up a sack full of guns, and fixates on the babysitter keeping the sauce from sticking to the side of the pot on the stove back home.¹⁹ All of us viewers can see Hill’s end approaching with the inevitability of a freight train, but, overwhelmed by his daily obsessions, he ignores all the signs.

Turning toward the parable of the talents, we search for resonances with its *Idea C*, companion story that concludes Chapter 24. Beginning with the obvious repetition of the slave-master relationship, we note, too, that both stories conceive circumstances to reveal the servants’ “true” character.²⁰ Likewise, in both stories, the master entrusts his property to those he leaves behind,²¹ and he promises greater responsibility and status to those who prove trustworthy²² – in the first story, Jesus announcing “Blessed is that slave whom the master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of *all* his possessions.”²³

In today’s Gospel, “after a long time” the master returns and requests an accounting of his property.²⁴ We remember how the parable goes: when the slaves who had received five and two talents come forward and present their profits, the master responds enthusiastically, understating

for effect the amounts that had been returned as witnessing “responsibility over a little” [these are grand sums], and promising that they will now be “set over much.”²⁵

The master’s generosity with the first two builds hope that he will be gracious with the third ... and then the polemical hammer comes crashing, Joe Pesci style: “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?”²⁶

As the parable intends, this reaction offends our sense of fairness: the inequitable assessment of “ability,” the unequal distribution of talents, the shaming of this last servant who has been set up to fail from jump.²⁷ Given the Bamboo Lounge²⁸ vibes of the judgements to this point, I can understand his fearfulness.²⁹ Even so, realize that *all the slaves receive a response that meets their expectations exactly*. The first two expect abundance, and abundance comes to pass; this last one expects cruelty, and cruelty comes calling. While the master does not enter a defense of his reaping and gathering, his sarcasm – “You knew, did you...?” – implies that he believes the third servant has mischaracterized him.³⁰ The parable concludes with more sensationalized judgement – “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”³¹ – a fate we should read as hyperbolically as the affirmations of the first two.

The X-shaped structure, A-B-c-c-B- and then *Idea A*, again: when we mark the “Reign of Christ” next Sunday, we will complete the chiasmus and consider Chapter 25’s redevelopment of the earlier apocalyptic warnings in the familiar division of the sheep from the goats,³² and the king who welcomes the faithful with the encouraging words, “Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me [drink] ...”³³

While recasting a Gospel parable with characters and scenes from a Martin Scorsese drama may seem a stretch, realize that his films captivate us by their depiction of gangsters as something like ordinary people whose stories have footholds in our own – as kids who grew up on the block looking up to the older boys down the street; as families with electricity bills and “professional aspirations” [shall we call them]; as friends with meaningful camaraderie ... even if their connection finds fullest expression while they spend several years together in prison. *Goodfellas* calls us to see ourselves in the alleys and bars we customarily avoid; helps us to recognize its characters in the “safe” settings we inhabit; and reflects *all of us* caught in this world’s competing gears – one brutal, and one merciful; one withholding, and one generous.

And through the *Goodfellas* god of Matthew 24 and 25, we recognize these same, dueling economies at work: one grinding with the world’s harsh judgements, and one turning for the sake of Christ’s Grace. We can read the parable of the talents’ crescendo – “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”³⁴ – not as a judgement of what is to come, but as an

observation of the truth we must negotiate *now*: the dystopian end-of-the-age and the loving reign of God are both already underway!

In such a circumstance, *Jesus establishes constancy and loyalty to God's reign as our essential faithfulness*. And we must decide to which gear, to which economy we will dedicate ourselves day by day, task by task, appreciating that all we do and choose in *this* age, in *this* moment, has greater consequences for God's reign and the world around us. The parable of the talents makes clear that if we invest ugliness, then that ugliness will be returned – not by God's judgement, but by our choosing; yet, if we are generous as God is generous, then the return of Grace will be “far more than all we can ask or imagine.”³⁵

That we would be loyal companions in this household of God;
Amen.

¹ From Psalm 31.

² Matthew 24:1a.

³ Matthew 24:1b. Today's appointment is 25:14-30, and next week's ("Reign of Christ" Sunday) is 25:31-46.

⁴ Matthew 24:2.

⁵ Matthew 24:3.

⁶ Matthew 24:9-10, 12, 16-22.

⁷ Matthew 24:15.

⁸ Matthew 24:4-5, 11, 23-26.

⁹ Matthew 24:37-39, 42.

¹⁰ Matthew 24:50.

¹¹ Scorsese, Martin, director. *Goodfellas*. Warner Brothers, 1990. ["You think I'm funny? ... Funny how? Like I'm a clown, I amuse you?"](#) That scene rockets me to the terrifying caprice of my childhood cafeterias and gym-class locker rooms.

¹² 24:51. The master “*will cut him in pieces* and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Yikes.

¹³ Matthew 24:44.

¹⁴ Matthew 25:13.

¹⁵ Matthew 24:40-41. “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.”

¹⁶ Played by Lorraine Bracco in the film.

¹⁷ Matthew 25:2-12. I resisted connecting the *wise* bridesmaids to *Wiseguy*, the title of Nicholas Pileggi’s 1986 non-fiction book upon which Scorsese based *Goodfellas*. Pileggi would continue collaborating with Scorsese and, with the Director, wrote the script for *Casino*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ [Upon Ray Liotta’s death last year, *Rolling Stone* published this admiring article \(including a video\) about the scene.](#) I love so much about it, from George Harrison’s asking “What Is Life” as the soundtrack; to the way Liotta leans against streetlamps and looks up, his shirt flapping open and his Wayfarers flashing; to Lois’ complete annoyance at the whole situation.

²⁰ Matthew 24:45a and 25:14. The masters are “away” and “on a journey.”

²¹ Matthew 24:45b and 25:15.

²² Matthew 25:20-23.

²³ Matthew 24:46-47.

²⁴ Matthew 25:19.

²⁵ Matthew 25:20-23.

²⁶ Matthew 25:26.

²⁷ Matthew 25:15, 26-28.

²⁸ The bar in *Goodfellas*.

²⁹ Matthew 25:18, 24.

³⁰ Matthew 25:26.

³¹ Matthew 25:30.

³² Matthew 25:32-33.

³³ Matthew 25:34-36.

³⁴ Matthew 25:39.

³⁵ One last time this Stewardship season, back to good, ol’ Ephesians 3:20.