

Billy Collins is a former poet laureate of the United States (2001-2003) and a professor of English at Lehman College in New York. A favorite poem is his "Introduction to Poetry," written, no doubt, with some reluctant students of poetry in mind, as well as others of us who want "to find out what [a poem] really means," even if we have to beat the meaning out of it.

Collins asks, instead, that we ". . . take a poem/ and hold it up to the light/ like a color slide/or press an ear against its hive." r, my favorite, ". . . walk inside the poem's room/ and feel the walls for a light switch."

What's in here? A good image, good approach for hearing parables, as well.

What we see and hear so often is shaped by what we expect and assume we will see and hear. Walking around inside to see what is inside is a good idea.

There are two common interpretations to today's parable of the talents. The first goes something like this: God gives all of us talents; some more and some less. It's up to us to use, develop, grow them. It's all about self-development, self-realization. Taking the risk to invest, multiply and be fruitful. And then be blessed and rewarded. But, hide your light under a bushel, bury your talent, and you lose. This smacks of "works righteousness" to me. Earn your salvation. Make it in the world. A kind of Christian capitalism.

The second interpretation holds that the master in the parable is not God, not Jesus. He is, simply, an absentee landowner who exploits peasants to make his fortune and is, indeed, harsh and unjust. The slaves who multiply the talents left with them go along with the unjust system. The slave who receives the one talent is the hero of the story who resists the system, refuses to play along.

I wonder, about the first interpretation: is this a God we want to believe in? A savior we want to follow? And as to the second, those "facts" aren't in the parable. And, more than that, everything still comes to a screeching halt. Nothing is changed by the one-talent slave's inaction. The system continues as it was. There is no movement, no transformation.

It helps, as we explore the parable, to note where we are. We're at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew. It is Holy Week, Jesus is in Jerusalem. He's teaching his disciples about the end time when God's purposes will be fulfilled on earth, at the coming of the Son of Man. About that time, one thing is settled: no one knows when it will be. The concern for the disciples, and for the Church now, is how do we wait, what do we do in between?

This is the third of three parables addressing the question. Each uses a stark contrast to get our attention. In the first, a man leaves his household in the care of a slave and then goes away for a long time. The contrast is between a slave who feeds and cares for the other slaves, and one who gets drunk and beats them. The former is blessed; the latter is cast out to weeping and gnashing of teeth. The second parable contrasts the wise and foolish bridesmaids awaiting

the delayed arrival of the bridegroom. The wise have brought extra oil for the lamps; the foolish have not. When the bridegroom finally arrives, only the ones who have prepared for his coming are admitted to the marriage feast. The foolish are shut out.

In this morning's parable, something of great value has been entrusted: the talents. The word in Greek is *talanta*. While our English "talents" is derived from the Greek, in the first century a *talent* was originally a measure of weight, between 60 and 80 pounds. (I picture the slaves pushing around the talents, huge piles of silver or gold, in wheelbarrows!) By Jesus' time, talents were coinage, the largest denomination. The amount the master left with his slaves would have been eight million dollars, more or less—a small fortune.

Notice that he entrusts this small fortune to his slaves. He is not testing them. He knows they are capable, they have what it takes to manage this responsibility. Notice, also, that he leaves the money with them *with no instructions*. (I don't even leave my dogs with a dog-walker without a long page of instructions, including emergency contact numbers.) Then he goes away, for a long time.

Think about how one of us might respond if handed so great a responsibility. One possibility is to realize, *He trusts me! Believes in me. I have his respect and confidence. I am honored. Empowered. Grateful.* We might begin to see ourselves as he sees us, as worthy of great trust. We might grow in self-confidence. Transformation!

Another possibility is to react with self-doubt and fear. To cower. To see the responsibility as a huge burden, a set-up or a trap, and to resent the one who's given it. To project our negative feelings and image onto the giver, seeing the master as a monster, harsh and unjust. What we can see and hear is often shaped by what we expect and assume. What we expect and assume may well turn out to be what we end up with. We just might dig ourselves into a hole.

What is entrusted here is huge. The word for "property" here also means "existence," what exists, what is really present. We could say that what the man has entrusted to his slaves is his *substance*, his own strength, the means he has at his disposal.

The slave with one talent can't imagine himself as the master sees him. He lives in fear. Does what he can to make himself safe. In first century Palestine, it was considered wise and prudent to bury treasure, to protect it from thieves. What the slaves given the five and two talents did would have seemed very risky, by way of contrast. So it would have been a shock to Jesus' listeners, to the disciples, to hear the slave called lazy and wicked, rather than commended. The impact of the shock would be to go back to the beginning of the story, walk around inside it and look again.

The slaves with the five and two talents took them and traded with them. Put them in circulation. There is exchange here, both in the market with those they traded with, and with the master when he returned. There is mutuality going on. These two are not passive; they risk. Or do they, really?

It is as if there is something in the talents themselves, in the treasure itself, that moves them to put it into circulation, to shop it around so it could do what it is intended to do. Something in the substance entrusted to them.

We are talking about the Gospel, you know, the good news of God in Jesus Christ. The hope that is entrusted to the Church, the hope that is in us. That, despite any and all evidence to the contrary, all things are moving to their fulfillment: the healing, reconciliation, justice and peace of God. We grope for words to describe our hope; the Gospel is more than words. It is the substance, the presence of Christ in and among the community. We have been entrusted with the same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

Karl Barth has described the Christian life as motion and movement. “Trading,” maybe. The Gospel wants to move out into the open, to be *out there* in the light, to give light in the darkness. To expose the darkness, the injustice, the absence of real substance in so much of the powers and pursuits of the world.

This is what Jesus has entrusted the Church with until his return: to show forth, put in circulation the hope and confidence that God’s purposes are being fulfilled on earth as in heaven, even now. Can you imagine yourself, can we as community imagine ourselves as Jesus sees us? Made in the image of God—good, very good, as God pronounced humankind at creation? Trustworthy.

We often experience and speak of the grace of being loved, fully accepted by God. Think also and beyond this to the joy, the unimaginable honor, of being trusted to share and multiply that grace and love.

We are not asked to do it alone, but as community. “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing,” the Apostle Paul wrote the church at Thessalonica. *As you* are doing. He went on to say what that consists in: encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone; do good to everyone; rejoice, always; pray without ceasing; do not quench the Spirit.

I’ve been thinking about what the man with the one talent might have done with it, other than bury it, if he really believed the master was harsh and unjust. He might have used the money to feed the hungry, or, better yet, teach sustainable methods of farming (as in the Trinidad Project in Honduras, or Hope for Burundi); to clothe the naked, or teach people to sew so they can afford to cloth themselves and other people, too. Something that might create a possibility of transformation in the master and the system, showing another way.

Paul tells us that we are children of the light. The light of the Gospel is entrusted to us, but not to keep for ourselves. Let the light shine through you, into a world that refuses to believe in a God who is harsh and unjust. Feel around the walls for a light switch. Fill the house with light. Then open all the windows and doors, invite everyone in, and then take the power and light of Christ out into the world.