Throw Him Into the Outer Darkness
Matthew 25:14-30
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In this fall season, we are pulling from the scholarship and writing of Dr. Amy-Jill Levine as we study some of the more difficult words of Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus spent three years teaching and preaching in the region of modern-day Israel, offering a physical – incarnate – witness of God to the covenant people of Israel. His life was a visible manifestation of the will of God. The words he spoke, the parables he told, the miracles he performed, the meals he shared, they were all part of the proclamation of God's desire for creation.

But some of those words, some of Jesus's teachings, have baffled would-be disciples for centuries. Holding on to the historic proclamation that the scriptures contain all that is necessary for salvation, all that's needed for us to understand God's will for creation, we are spending some intentional time looking at the sayings of Jesus that others have sought to ignore, or even to write out of the scriptural text. From the imperative direction to sell all your possessions, to hating your mother and father, to being a slave of all, we are seeking the good news of these difficult words.

This morning, we are looking at what is editorially titled, "The Parable of the Talents," to consider Jesus's condemnation of the third slave into the "outer darkness."

As I first read this text, a few questions that arose in my own mind: first, what is the "outer darkness" to which the slave is condemned; second, why was this slave condemned to such an outer darkness; and finally, how would this teaching have been understood by the first disciples, and how might this parable inform our discipleship today?

To glean some input on these questions, I did as I do every week, I began to do some external research. I have a handful of commentaries from which I seek input and insight each week. I also have a growing number of online commentaries that offer more current application, from which I usually read. And then I use additional academic publications, such as the current book we're using by Amy-Jill Levine.

As I sought to glean input to help answer my questions this week, I found that very few commentators actually discuss the "outer darkness." There's no shortage of commentary on this scriptural story, but the commentary isn't focused on the closing verse. Most of the commentary on this parable of the talents is on understanding the *talents*.

There are a million and a half different takes on how we are to understand the parable regarding the use of *talents.* For example: we can see the talents as financial resources, which is a pretty direct pull from the text, in which a New Testament *talent* is worth about 6,000 denarii (which was a silver coin). We can see the *talent* as a modern-day talent – a gift, an ability, or a skilled competence. It might be a

God-given gift to use for the purpose of making God's love known in the world. There are others who suggest that the *talent* might be seen as time, and they invite preachers to frame the parable as offering an imperative to not sit idly by, but to be engaged in the work of God as we await the final coming of Christ.

I could go on; and perhaps that would be easier than looking at the final verse of the parable. A sermon around putting to work our gifts is a lot more palatable than the condemnation of the one who buried his talent in the ground and out of fear, did nothing in his master's absence.

It would also be easier because there is a lot more scholarship and commentary on the application of using our "talents" for the good of God than there is on the "outer darkness."

But we're not settling for easy this month, we're digging deeper and asking the hard questions out loud. So, here we go: "what is the outer darkness," and "what's a disciple today to do with this parable that says the outer darkness is in the realm of places we might end up?"

Let's start with defining the *outer darkness*. To grasp what Jesus *might* be saying, we have to understand the outer darkness within the mental framework of first century Judaism. Remember, at the time Jesus told this parable, there was no "Christian Church." Jesus had not been crucified or resurrected; there had been no Ascension or Pentecost; Jesus was a Jew; the disciples were all Jews; the people following and listening to Jesus's teachings were all Jewish. What *they* thought about the "outer darkness" is far more important in this moment than what we might think today.

So, what's the historical Jewish understanding of "outer darkness?" This two-word phrase is only found three-times in the Biblical text, each found in Matthew's gospel. This makes finding direct connections to other teachings of Jesus difficult. Thankfully, Amy-Jill Levine goes into great detail using the ancient Hebrew Scriptures to help us understand historic Jewish thought.

In most Christian discourses, we liken the "outer darkness" to hell. We consider the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth to be a place of purgatory or final condemnation. *Levine says no such place existed in ancient Jewish teaching.* She writes, "Ancient Israelite thought, as least as can be reconstructed from the Hebrew texts, viewed postmortem existence for everyone as in Sheol or Abaddon, a shadowy type of half-life: dark, away from God, away from either pain or pleasure."[i] We find the first example of this in Genesis 37:35, when Jacob, believing his son Joseph to have been killed, says he will go down to *Sheol* to find his son. As Levine notes, *Sheol* wasn't understood to a place of torture for the unrighteous; in fact, here, Joseph, the son thought to have been killed, was not in the least bit unfaithful, but was still thought to have been sent to *Sheol*. It was just a place for the dead.

This term Sheol is used in the Hebrew Scriptures throughout the Old Testament to refer to place one goes when they die.

A shift in the language took place when the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek for the first time, around the 3rd Century BCE. When the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture was first completed, the word *Sheol* was rendered as *Hades,* pulling from Greek mythology, as Hades was "both

the name of the god of the dead and the underworld kingdom that he rules."[ii] Given the timing of this shift, it is likely that the earliest disciples would have associated the "outer darkness" with both titles, *Sheol* and *Hades*, pulling from the Hebrew and the Greek. However, even in Greek mythology, the underworld over which *Hades* ruled was not a fiery place of torture for the unfaithful, it was simply a place where the dead went upon dying.

Levine further notes, "The Tanakh (the whole of the Hebrew Scripture of the Old Testament) has no notion of hell in the sense of eternal punishment for the wicked, and it has very little to say even about the fate of the righteous."[iii] Even still today, Levine offers, in the Bible of Judaism, there is no reference to hell in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It wasn't until the publication of the apocalyptic writings, such as Revelation, that the Christian world started to associate the underworld of *Hades* as a place of eternal torture for the unfaithful. This association didn't happen, as Revelation wasn't written, until later in the 1st Century, some 30 years or more after Jesus' death and resurrection. In all of his writings, "Paul never mentions a dreadful afterlife for sinners and/or nonbelievers."[iv] And, just for record keeping purposes, it was not until the publication of the King James Version of the Christian Bible, in 1611, that the Hebrew term *Sheol* was translated using the English word "hell." And, while the use of "hell" for *Sheol* is still found in many Christian Bibles today whose translation is dependent on the earlier work of the King James, it still doesn't appear in the Jewish Bible.

So, from a historical perspective, it doesn't seem like those hearing Jesus's parable told for the first time would have assumed the "outer darkness" to be a hell-like place of eternal torment and damnation. The "outer darkness," at least from a 1st Century Jewish perspective, seems to fit the framework of Psalm 23 – it was the valley of the shadow of death – a place removed from life and light; a place removed from the presence of community and love; a place of absence and void.

Amy-Jill Levine likes this darkness to a black hole, "the phenomenon that occurs when massive stars die and then collapse in on themselves."[v] The pull of the black hole is so strong, that even light cannot escape.

While centuries of post-apocalyptic Christianity have set up the opposite of "heaven" to be "hell," and thus the opposite of great joy to be great torment, the frame work of the "outer darkness" from a historic Jewish perspective sets up the opposite of heaven, not to be hell, but to be *nothingness* or *complete separation*. This seems to say as much about the outer darkness as it does the kingdom of heaven. One is created in the construct of blessed community, the other in the bleakness of eternal isolation. Even in the 1700s, John Wesley claimed the "outer darkness" had a chief focus on "the loss of fellowship with friends and with God."[vi]

With this framework of the "outer darkness" in mind, let's return to the parable, keeping in mind, as Levine notes, "parables are not videotapes of life; they are stories designed to challenge us, to provoke us, to get us to think, and to motivate us to act morally."[vii]

A master has given three slaves separate sums of money prior to taking a leave of absence. He has entrusted into their care *his* property while he is to be away. Don't skew the story, he has not *gifted* them the money – the money is not theirs. They are slaves, and they have been told to serve as caretakes over the master's property.

The first slave takes the 5 talents they were entrusted and doubles it. The second takes the 2 talents they were entrusted and doubles it. The third, having been entrusted with only 1 talent, buries it, ensuring it's security, and returns it to the master without interest or loss.

The master, who had expressed gratitude to the first two slaves (who had doubled *his* property), is not pleased with the third who buried the talent in the ground. In fact, the master is so unhappy, he takes away the talent away, adds it to the property entrusted to the first slave, and then has the third slave killed – thrown into the place of "outer darkness" – the underworld, *Sheol*, *Hades*, the place of the dead.

This text, parable as it may be, reminds us of the horrors of slavery, acknowledging that a slave's life could taken at any moment by the master's request. This slave is thrown into the "outer darkness." That is to say, "The slave is killed; his memory is defamed."[viii]

I'm curious what you might take away if we were to leave the parable alone at this point. Unlike some of Jesus' other parables, there is not sidenote through which Jesus offers an explanation to the disciples in private. How we understand this story is up to our own interpretation of the text. But I wonder, how might our understanding shift if the focus isn't on avoiding hell – as a place of eternal torment and fire, but is instead an invitation to avoid death – as a place of eternal isolation?

To solidify this question, I want to spend just a few moments widening our focus and looking at this chapter in Matthew as having one continual focus, not as three separate stories – as Matthew 25 is usually broken into three stories.

The first 13 verses of this chapter tell the parable of the bridesmaids. The story ends with some of the bridesmaids being left outside of the wedding party after the groom's return. The final critique offered by Jesus following the telling of the parable is, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." We're told to be ready for the Lord's return.

Then we have the parable of the talents, our text from this morning, in which the third slave was sentenced to death for having done nothing while the master was away. His condemnation was, at least in part, for not being ready for the master's return.

And then, beginning in verse 31, Jesus tells a story about the final coming of the Son of Man. As he foretells what the final coming will be like, he speaks these familiar words: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and your visited me." Both the righteous and the unrighteous questioned when these events took place, and

Jesus responds, “Truly I tell you, just as you did (or did not) do to one of the least of these, you did (or did not) do to me.”

I can’t help but see a common thread among these three stories. Throughout this chapter, those who are condemned as unfaithful – those who are chastised in the parables – are those that weren’t ready for the presence of Christ (the groom in the first story, the master in the second story, and the Son of Man in the third story). The unprepared are left outside of the party, or sent to the black hole of eternal isolation, or separated from the gathering of all nations at Christ’s return because they had not been ready for the presence of God in their midst.

When we read these stories, we often focus on the fear of being left out. We often find the parables to be harsh critiques of those who are unready and unprepared. And certainly this worry comes from a faithful reading of the text. But in light of the third story – as a common thread among the stories – I find myself not focusing on Jesus’ harsh critique, but instead on a necessary invitation that makes a proclamation of the good news. This is the *gospel* after all.

As Jesus weaves these parables into the framework of a promised and future coming, his invitation takes on a crucial and physical form. The need to be ready has a purpose, and it’s a purpose that is greater than welcoming the most grandiose of royal entrances. We must be ready, Christ says, to see his presence in the midst of everyone we meet. We must be welcoming of each person who comes to us for help, for in each person – in the beggar, in the homeless, in the hungry, in the outcast, in every soul we cross, we must be prepared to see the person of Christ – the incarnation of God’s love, present in our midst.

This, my friends, is the good news. Christ dwells in our community, and we are called to be ready that we might greet one another as though they were Christ himself. For the opposite of heaven is not hell, it is isolation, and we were not created to live this life alone. So go forth to proclaim and to share in the joy of God’s love, sharing that love with every neighbor you meet. Amen.

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[i] Amy-Jill Levine. *The Difficult Words of Jesus.* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021.
[ii] Levine.
[iii] Levine.
[iv] Levine.
[v] Levine.
[vi] John Wesley. *Notes on the New Testament.*
[vii] Levine.
[viii] Levine.