“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 I went and hid your talent in the ground. . .But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave!’”

What a perplexing parable. Sure doesn’t sound like Jesus talking, does it? Like the parable about the 5 bridesmaids last week being refused entry into the wedding banquet basically because they were late, ***this*** parable ends with a cautious slave being thrown into outer darkness because he was afraid that his master would punish him if he lost any of his money. How do we make sense out of all of that?

For Theo last week, and for me this week, the parable of the 10 bridesmaids and the parable of the Talents in today’s reading, ***were*** difficult to say the least. Being a shy boy who worried about always showing up perfect, I was constantly worried about losing my salvation if I did something wrong. For me, the slave who buried his talent in the ground to be on the safe side was exactly what I would have done. So, I became hyper vigilant about everything I did, down to the miniscule detail. It was exhausting and I finally threw out the baby with the bath water when I became an alcoholic.

BUT MAYBE THIS ISN’T A PARABLE ABOUT THE *COMING* KINGDOM OF GOD. MAYBE THIS IS A PARABLE ABOUT THE WORLD WE LIVE IN RIGHT NOW. Maybe these parables are about how the world operates with a dog eat dog morality that has only one agenda–to take care of number one before you take care of anybody else. So, for the 5 bridesmaids who showed up but forgot to bring extra oil but still didn’t give

up, went out and bought more, but when they came back, they were still denied a seat at the table with the in crowd because they were late? Believe me when I tell you, in corporate America, people are fired for much less than that.

And regarding today's reading, as Episcopal Priest Debie Thomas writes, "the metaphor of God-as-wealthy-slave-master doesn't align with the gracious and justice-oriented God Jesus describes throughout the Gospels.

As for the slave who decided to bury his master's exorbitant wealth (BTW, a single talent was worth at least the equivalent of how much a day laborer could make in 15 years); he was the one who actually had a change of heart to opt out of a system of exploitation. He decided that he no longer wanted to participate in a dishonest system of gain, a system based on oppression and injustice. So, he buried his talent in the earth so it couldn't be used as a way to take advantage of the poor.

And we are being called to do the same thing, stand apart from the status quo which to quote James Talarico, is infusing our politics with a moral foundation that defines our politics, a love your neighbor as yourself baseline that changes everything, including how we legislate.

In fact the final parable in Matthew 25 advocates for a new standard that is other centric instead of me centric. We are told that in as much as we take care of those who can't take care of themselves, the ones described as the least of these, we are doing it to Jesus and for Jesus.

That's the only way 'love your neighbor" becomes more than a slogan or a bumper sticker. And for that to happen, we are going to have to start

practicing what we preach wherever we go and with whomever we meet. It's not about being "nice" to your neighbor, it's about letting them off the hook, forgiving them the way Jesus forgave his perpetrators when he prayed for God to forgive them simply because they did not know what they were doing.

That means becoming someone new, acquiring a new perspective that always remembers that we are all children of God, including the ones we disagree with. So where do we begin?

- Instead of acting like we're better than the other guy, we can practice **humility**, holding each other as siblings before God.
- Instead of *blaming others*, we have to show up with a "love your neighbor" attitude that can only come from a changed heart.
- Instead of defaulting to *animosity*, we choose **compassion,** leaning directly into God's abundant grace that allows the sun to rise on the good and the bad and let the rain fall on the righteous and the unrighteous.

It means staying alert for opportunities to live into the grace we will need to pick up our cross and follow Jesus ***wherever*** that might lead.

Sometimes that can be scary, I know–

I was heading home to Santa Barbara from being with my guys at Lompoc Prison two weeks ago when an SUV pulled up alongside me on HWY 1 with its emergency lights flashing and the driver gesturing at me that he was upset about something. At 70 miles an hour with a full face helmet on, I couldn't hear a word he was saying. Over the course of the next few minutes this behavior continued and a number of different things

ran through my mind. Was he angry with me because I had gone past him earlier on? Was he trying to let me know that there was something wrong with my motorcycle and I needed to stop and check? In any case, I allowed him to go past me and just stayed behind him, but then he started to slow down, which forced me to slow down and he finally found a spot where he could pull over and in that moment, ***in that moment,*** instead of just continuing on, I heard a voice say, “I guess I’m supposed to have a conversation with this guy.”

A remarkable calm came over me as he got out of his truck and as I waited for whatever was going to happen next, somehow I knew I was not alone. As he walked up to me, I noticed he was wearing a beautiful Native American beaded necklace. I was expecting an epitaph at the very least, but the first thing he asked me was, “Are you a Native American?” And in that instant, I knew why he was upset. On the back of my leather vest is a big Indian head patch dressed in a war bonnet which I wear because I ride an Indian motorcycle. But I knew that there are a few Native Americans who believe that symbol shows disrespect for their heritage. With a firm, respectful voice, I explained to him how much respect I have for his heritage and the reason for the patch was simply because I ride an Indian motorcycle. He mentioned that he is a member of the Choctaw tribe and trying to embrace the heritage that had been passed down to him. He pointed out that the feathers in a war bonnet are sacred and deserve respect.

He then admitted that he didn’t even know that Indian was a motorcycle brand and that brought a smile to both of our faces. As the tension eased, I also went on to tell him that as far as I was concerned, this

country still had a long way to go to make amends for the genocide perpetrated on his people when we were expanding geography from sea to shining sea. It is our unconfessed original sin as a nation.

And it was at that moment, he reached out both of his hands to shake my hand as a gesture of reconciliation and understanding. In that moment, hatred was defeated and brotherhood was embraced as we both went our separate ways. Separate but changed forever. And for me, I can no longer wear that Indian emblem on my vest.

And with many of the new democrats promoting a love your neighbor politics, I am hopeful that the dream of MLK over 60 years ago might still come true. I have a dream that our new Congress will put compassion first over a payback agenda. I have a dream that simple acts of kindness will not only start to make a difference in our local communities but, will also take hold of our legislative body in a new wave of addressing the needs of the least of these, including the prison population, families who can't afford healthcare, who are working two and three jobs just to make ends meet, let alone finding any affordable housing. I have a dream that "love your neighbor as yourself" will become the new standard for how we treat each other with respect, with compassion, and with kindness..

My siblings in Christ, something bigger than ourselves is moving in our land. A gracious God is giving us one more chance to work together before it's too late. It will be a wild ride, I probably won't live to see it come to fruition. But I have a dream that one day there will be a new heaven and a new earth and God will make his home among mortals and death will be no more. Can I get an Episcopal AHHH-MEN?