The incredibly freeing lesson in the Parable of the Talents

The two obedient servants come to see in themselves what the master sees in them. That is what the parable asks of us as well.

Can you remember a moment in your life when someone looked at you with special concern, recognizing something in you that you had not seen in yourself — a potential? For me it was my ninth-grade teacher Mrs. Szczesny. When the guidance counsellor concluded that academically all I could manage was general math, it was Mrs. Szczesny who gave me a chance at algebra. She never let me feel inferior. In fact, she entrusted me with an extracurricular task which proved to me just how much confidence she had in me. And algebra ended up being one of my best freshman subjects!

The exceptional master

Something similar transpires in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14-30). This mysterious master is a man of exceptional sensitivity and solicitude. The talent-burying third servant accuses the master of being a "demanding person." But there is no evidence of that in the story. When the two servants return after earning loads of money, the master doesn't even keep it — he gives the money away. The master is the opposite of demanding: other-directed, tender-hearted, and trusting to a fault.

The three servants to whom the master entrusts — literally "hands over" — his possessions are not financial stewards, accountants, or brokers. They are the lowest form of servants — the ones consigned to base and menial tasks. So insignificant are they in the household that it most likely stuns them to discover that the master even knows they exist. Yet he actually knows much more. He knows which particular servant can handle five talents, which one two, and which one. Which means he possesses an intimate knowledge of each servant's ability, right down to the most minute differences.

The servants are further stunned by what the master gives them: just a single talent was worth more than 15 years' worth of a labourer's wages. And as the master hands over this staggering sum to the servants, notice what he says to them: *nothing*. He gives them no instructions. He says not a word; he just goes away. So, either this is some kind of sadistic set-up … or it's a heartfelt challenge … an invitation even.

Maybe this is the first time someone has paid attention to these servants, gotten to know them, acknowledged their potential, and trusted them with

responsibility beyond their imagining. When people we look up to treat us like that, it can make us feel worthy …respected … loved. Perhaps this is the servants' first experience of being truly accepted, appreciated, wanted. And even though the servants could well abscond with their newfound fortune, they don't. They choose to stay with the master. They invest the master's money and come back to settle accounts because "those who are loved enter fearlessly into the heart of their lover" (St. John Chrysostom).

What the parable is about

And that is precisely the motivation for the master's actions. The master is a symbol of God the Father who cannot bear to see his children enslaved by anything. We are made for freedom. Yet so strong is the hold on us of the things that enslave us — fear, addictions, bad habits, dread, self-loathing, chronic sin, misery, hopelessness — that we become cemented to our slavery. We need to be wooed away from it. That's what the master in the parable sets out to do.

The point of the parable is not about garnering assets but gaining trust. The master concocts a kind of test to elicit confidence, devotion, and faith from his servants. He wants to transform them from servants into sons.

The two obedient servants come to see in themselves what the master sees in them. That is what the parable asks of us as well. Our longed-for liberation results from relying on the confidence that God himself confides in us. God the Father hands over to us his "possession" — his own Son in the Passion, death, and Resurrection (at the time of the parable's telling, the crucifixion is just a few days away). More than being about making money, the parable challenges us to make the most of what God's grace makes possible. The Father invests in us.