



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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I Don't Dance

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 15, 2020

The Twenty-fourth Sunday of Pentecost

Based on Matthew 25:14-30

Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think with them; take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen.

When CBS recently brought back the once-popular “Sunday Night at the Movies,” nostalgia got the best of me, and I found and watched an old favorite of mine—*Clear and Present Danger*, based on Tom Clancy’s espionage thriller, and starring Harrison Ford. It is about Jack Ryan, a CIA agent whom the President of the United States assigns to go up against a drug cartel. Ryan has some idea of doing this legally, but his partner Ritter has a better idea: he sets up a covert military operation behind Ryan’s back. By the time Ryan finds out about it, a lot of bombs have exploded and a lot of people have died.

After almost getting killed himself, he winds up in the Oval Office with a nasty looking cut over his right eye, confronting the President about his own part in the scandal. The President denies it at first, but when Ryan announces his intention to take what he knows to the Senate Oversight Committee, the President’s face goes slack. Then he begins to grin, and says, “You’re not going to do that, Jack. You’ve got yourself a chip in the big game now. You’re going to tuck that away. You’re going to save that for a time when your own life is on the line. Then you’re going to pull it out, and I’m going to cash it in for you.”

“I am?” Jack asks.

“The country can’t afford another deception that goes all the way to the top,” the President says. “You’ll take the blame, and you will be punished, but it won’t amount to much. A slap on the wrist. You know, Jack, the old Potomac two-step.”

To which Ryan says, “I’m sorry, Mr. President. I don’t dance.”

Now that is a great line, but the only reason it worked was that Ryan took no pleasure in saying it. He looked miserable through the whole movie, even at the end when he raised his right hand and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth to the Senate. If he had been enjoying himself at that point, it would have ruined everything, because then he would have been the object of his own devotion.

Instead, he came across as a servant of truth, which was more important to him than his own comfort, safety, or reputation. What happened after the credits rolled was anybody’s guess. It was entirely possible that Jack Ryan wound up discredited and disgraced by a Senate that supported the President instead of him, but I do not think that would have mattered to Jack. His purpose was not to become a hero. His purpose was to serve truth.

I give you this extended movie review because I think it will get you in the mood for Matthew's gospel today. In it, Jesus shares with his disciples yet another parable of what God's realm is like—specifically, of what true discipleship is.

Before going abroad to pursue the interests of his household, a wealthy aristocrat summons three of his staff from his most trusted inner circle and assigns to them proportions of his assets according to their status in his household hierarchy. Even though the amounts of wealth entrusted to each reflect relative standing, the very lowest still belongs to the most powerful group. One talent is no mean amount of money to place in another's hands.

The first two slaves go to work "at once" and double their investment even though the master is gone for "a long time." Their industry reflects the zeal with which they work the system to make a handsome return for the master, but it also reflects their desire to use some portion of that endowment to feather their own nests. First things first: the master's initial investment must be secured, then doubled; after that, the slaves can make their profit, overtaxing a little here, a little there. They are always walking a tightrope, keeping the master's gain high enough to appease his greed and not incur his wrath while keeping their own accumulations of wealth small enough not to arouse suspicion yet lucrative enough to insure their future. The master knows the system, too, and as long as the slaves keep watch over his interests and maintain a proper yield, he does not begrudge their gains. In fact, he stands to gain a great deal by encouraging the process. Not only do the slaves do his dirty work, exploiting others for profit, but they also siphon off anger that would otherwise be directed at him and his class.

The first two slaves are as alike as peas in a pod. "In the same way" they both use the exploitive economy to increase the plunder that constitutes the master's wealth and multiply his dishonesty. Jesus' hearers would have had no difficulty identifying the type of figure represented by the slaves in the parable; they had to contend with them daily and the effects of this system on their village and families.

The third slave, however, is as puzzling as his action. He goes off, digs a hole in the ground, and hides his master's money; but, by digging a hole and burying the talent in the ground, he has taken it out of circulation. It can no longer be used to dispossess more peasants from their lands through its dispersion in the form of usurious loans. By his actions, the third slave disrupts the nefarious system and refuses to collaborate with the powers oppressing his community.

Upon the master's return, and when the first two slaves come before him, they are rewarded as expected. They have both calculated correctly; the 100 percent profit is pleasing to the master. The praise he offers veils the ugly realities suppressed beneath the profit margin: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave." Both slaves are good in terms of the master's values because they have proven to be effective exploiters. They are both given even more opportunities for continued "honest graft" while in the master's service.

When called before the master, the third slave cuts through the mystifying rhetoric that has dominated the exchange between the master and his first two slaves, and he identifies the master for what he is: strict, cruel, harsh, and merciless. "I'm sorry, Mr. President. I don't dance."

The third slave utters in the full light of day what he has learned in the dark; he reveals what has been covered beneath the public rhetoric of praise and promise, and proclaims clearly what has only been whispered among the elite and their servants. He describes the master for what he is and acknowledges his fear of the master's power. This whistle-blower is no fool. He realizes that he will pay a price, but he has decided to accept the cost rather than continue to prop up injustice and oppression.

It was that simple, and as far as I'm concerned, the high point of the story was right then, when the third slave said, "Here, you have what is yours." Everything that happened after that was extra. The moment of

sparkling clarity was the moment when one courageous, stubborn human being declared what —for the love of God—was truth. Period.

That is what makes this a good story about discipleship, especially the kind that leads to a cross. Jesus tells this parable a couple of days before his arrest and crucifixion, events that will testify to the world's penchant for punishing those who speak truth to power. It shows you how easy it is to get yourself killed, simply by saying, "I'm sorry, I don't dance." To the master. To Pilate. To any of the oppressive powers that want us to forget who and whose we are, and dance to their music.

Most of us face powers that are not so easy to identify. We have been living in and complicit with exploitive systems for so long that it takes special gifts of discernment just to recognize the masters. They do not seem like masters. To us they seem just like the hard realities of modern-day life.

One way to discern them is to pay attention to what is going on inside you. When someone in a position of authority asks you to do something that makes you feel queasy, start looking around for a talent. When someone suggests there may be dire consequences if you don't look the other way, go along and enjoy life, because, well, that's just the way things are: that ball of fear inside you is a sure sign that you are being recruited to do the master's bidding. His name does not matter, since he has no life of his own. His life comes from those who have set him up, and he is always hunting for new brokers of oppression.

It is very simple, someone tells you. When the band plays, dance. Worship the master. Increase his wealth and power. Thank him for all your good fortune, and promise him your loyalty from now on. Just produce when he says produce and good things will keep coming your way. Refuse to produce, and you lose everything.

That is the basic pattern, from before time and forever. Memorize it and you may begin to see it pop up here and there. You may even get your own chance to choose between the talent and the outer darkness. If you do, remember that there are two masters in this story. One is six feet tall, dripping in talents, and located safely outside the darkness. The other is flesh and blood, found inside the darkness —the One who stands with those who will not dance, walking with them through the midst of the weeping and gnashing of teeth.

AMEN

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