

November 19, Ordinary 33A (Matthew 25:14-30)

## **Some parables sound like bad jokes.**

by [Audrey West](#) in the [October 25, 2017](#) issue

When my nieces and nephews were little they loved to tell riddles and jokes. They would stand in the middle of the room and regale us with silly questions. Usually they read from books with titles like *Hilarious Kid Jokes* and *Knock-Knock Jokes for Children*. Why can't you bend a nickel in half? Change is hard. Knock, knock. Who's there? Cash. Cash who? No thanks, I prefer almonds.

Sometimes they would attempt to create riddles of their own. These usually involved non sequiturs that even the most comedic genius in the family could not decode. Knock, knock. Who's there? Elephant. Elephant who? There's a banana on your head.

As us adults scrunched up our faces and rolled our eyes, the kids would fall to the floor, laughing at a hidden hilarity of the universe that only they could comprehend. I imagine they viewed these sessions as a way to capture our attention. The less we understood, the greater their satisfaction. "Ask us for another one!" they pleaded. We complied, celebrating their originality while also hoping that this time we might actually get the joke.

At times, the parables of Jesus remind me of the riddles shared by my nieces and nephews. Some parables, like the jokes in the children's books, display internal logic or they are so familiar that I nod in recognition. For example, *The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.*

Other parables sound like confusing riddles, or even bad jokes.

Consider the parable of the talents. In Jesus' day, one talent represented wages for approximately 15 years: enough money to fund the winnings of a lottery jackpot. The story begins simply enough: "It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to

another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.”

While the man is gone, the first two servants put his money to work, doubling its initial value. The third servant guards the man’s fortune by burying it in the ground. When the man returns, the first two servants receive a handsome reward for their investment savvy. So far, so good, at least from the view of those who benefit from a Western market economy 2,000 years later. No joke here.

Then the parable takes a threatening turn. When the man learns that the third servant has hidden his money, he calls him out. “You wicked and lazy servant!” He confiscates the money and passes it along to the richest of the three servants. Adding insult to injury, he calls for the third servant to be cast into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The punch line of the parable seems to be that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Is this a good riddle or a bad joke? Perhaps Jesus speaks in parables so that his followers will be required to ponder that question.

On the one hand, the parable of the talents has long encouraged the church’s fruitful stewardship of whatever gifts God has given. By this reckoning, the servant who buries his gift is like a tree that does not bear good fruit. He deserves judgment. Those who increase their gifts are like a faithful servant who is at work when the Lord comes, who will be placed in charge of the Lord’s possessions.

Viewed from a different perspective, the parable exposes the challenges of faithfulness in a world dominated by power and wealth. The rich man has achieved his wealth at the expense of others—by “reaping where [he] did not sow, and scattering where [he] did not scatter seed.” The first two servants multiply his dishonesty. The third refuses to participate in this system of oppression, and for this refusal he is abandoned and condemned to a place of suffering.

The parable offers a clear-eyed analysis of the real world, perhaps leading the followers of Jesus to recall his earlier words about the cost of discipleship: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. . . . For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matt. 16:24–26).

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.

Like the third servant in the story, Jesus will be condemned to suffering. Abandoned by most of his friends, he will cry out to God, “Why have you forsaken me?” Then he will be buried in a rock-hewn tomb, just as the talent is buried deep in the ground.

This is not the end of the story, however, even if it marks the ending of that parable. As Matthew’s Gospel makes clear, a hole in the ground—even a tomb—cannot contain Jesus. He is the Messiah, raised from the dead. The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, and the day will come when the Messiah will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world. There is yet one more riddle to capture and hold the world’s attention.

Not a bad joke after all.