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MEMORIAL TO A WOMAN WITH AN ALABASTER JAR

(Speculations on Matthew 24 to 26)

I never lost as much but twice
And that was in the sod.
Twice have I stood a beggar
Before the door of God!

Angels - twice descending
Reimbursed my store -
Burglar! Banker – Father!
I am poor once more!

In this poem by Emily Dickinson[1] the speaker meditates on the connection between her experience of bereavement and her act of calling on God. Indeed, the "door of God," not a little ambiguous, may be the lid of a coffin or the abyss of an open grave. She remembers her loss of two loved ones, but does not tell us the nature of the third loss, which occasions the poem. She declares only her spiritual poverty. The most dramatic moment comes just before the final line. Before calling on God the "Father" from her despair, she accuses him with names of quite another sort: "Burglar! Banker --". God is an unpredictable trustee. Does her present grief leave her bitter toward this heavenly father?

I am inclined to think that the grief of the speaker in the poem has not embittered her, because her third loss is the loss of certain pious illusions. Why I think this may only become clear gradually; for the thought in Dickinson's poem is close to my general theme. If I am not mistaken, the poet has in mind here a couple of pages of the Gospel

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[1] #49 in the Thomas H. Johnson critical edition.

text, more or less the ones I shall present here for consideration. These pages are Jesus' last sermon in Matthew, where he reveals to his disciples that he will come again. Strange as it may sound, the path toward that spiritual impoverishment in Dickinson's poem parallels the movement of this gospel text. We might see this if we can approach the Bible with something of her own poetic spirit.

Poetic spirit: I should try to indicate what I mean by this, to avoid misunderstandings. By reading the Bible poetically I mean, first of all, reading *without* a particular theological viewpoint.[2] Like all prior opinions about a book, theology can cover over the original text without the reader realizing it. It is true of all our most cherished possessions: what we will not give up, we shall lose. If we can approach the gospel without imagining beforehand what it must or must not say, we allow for a sort of resurrection of its meanings. Our preconceptions pass away, the words themselves work upon us, and (when we do not quite expect it) the message of the book comes to life again.

The fresh experience of the text is often the work of noticing details. By reading poetically I also mean reading closely. I hope it will become clear in what follows how certain subtleties, certain ambiguities that Matthew incorporates into Jesus' last sermon, have evoked my speculations. If we ponder such details long enough, we may begin to see how they point to some startling line of thought.

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[2] Some ancient traditions of interpretation relied on surprisingly little theology. In Syriac and Oriental Christianity, for example, Greek philosophy, and hence doctrinal formulations, had relatively little influence. Poetry, paradox, and symbol characterized the writings in this Semitic tradition continuous with the Bible itself. See *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Sebastian Brock, ed. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publ., 1987), pp. x-xxxiv; and French translator of the Bible, Jean Grosjean, *Arameennes* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), pp. 135-138. Two outstanding examples in English translations are *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, transl. Anon. (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), and Grigor Narekatsi, *Lamentations of Narek*, transl. Mischa Kudian (London: Mashtots Press, 1977).

But I have not mentioned the most obvious feature of reading poetically which is the attunement to figurative speech. Must we not admit it? Jesus is a poet. Not just his parables but even his more ordinary utterances adopt the idiom of images – as if the divine language should retain a similarity to hieroglyphics, and the sacred still resemble a secret. Perhaps one never becomes proficient in this language of signs. I leave open to what extent I have succeeded in putting together the picture puzzle that is Jesus' last discourse. What I offer, to repeat, are so many speculations. But they will achieve their purpose if they show readers new entrances into the gospel text and lead them to better thoughts of their own about what it might mean.

Jesus' last sermon (beginning in chapter 24) is an answer to his disciples who question him about the end of the age and the return of the Son of Man. He begins by warning them about the wars and persecutions that will characterize the final epoch. But he does not represent that time as a far-off future. It is one with his disciples' mission in a hostile world. Earlier he told them:

> "When you are persecuted in one town, take refuge in another... Before you have gone through all the towns of Israel the Son of Man will have come." (Matt. 10:23. Cf. 26:64)[3]

Now he says in his long final speech:

> "This gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the earth as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." (Matt. 24:14)

The ambiguity is not only about when the final events will take place but also about how. What modern people think of as "apocalypse" – the cataclysms and wars that bring history to a conclusion – is a derivative idea. "Apocalypse" is first and foremost a

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[3] Both the New King James Version and the New English Bible have been used for citation, with minor corrections made to reflect the original Greek relevant to the argument. The source for the Greek text is the *Nestle-Almond Novum Testamentum Graece* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993).

disclosure, a revelation, a clarity of vision: that is its meaning as a biblical term. Jesus re-assures his disciples:

> "So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing covered up that will not be uncovered [*apokaluphthesetai*], nothing hidden that will not be made known." (Matt. 10:26)

The Kingdom comes in a spiritual as well as an historical sense.

> Consider this much-quoted passage from the gospel of Luke:
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> "You cannot tell by observation when the kingdom of God comes. There will be no saying, 'Look, here it is!' or 'there it is!'; for in fact the Kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20:21)

This obscure utterance follows:

> "The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' Do not go after them... For as the lightning that flashes out of one part under heaven and shines to the other...so also the Son of Man will be in his day." (Luke 17:22-25)

Here is the parallel passage in Matthew 24.

> "See I have forewarned you. If they tell you, 'He is there in the wilderness,' do not go out; or if they say, 'He is there in the inner room,' do not believe it. Like lightning from the east, flashing as far as the west, will be the coming of the Son of Man." (Matt. 24:25-27)

Does this metaphor of the messianic lightning only refer to an outward and future spectacle? The warning in the next line of Matthew sounds like a clue to something else.

> "Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."(28)

This line seems to parody the human attempt to possess the legacy of the dead messiah – to make of him an abstract truth on which to feed, a religious fact around which to congregate, an "historical Jesus." But Matthew's Jesus describes the Son of Man as unpredictable and astonishing; his return is like that phosphorescent flash across the horizon. Jesus' next remark continues the metaphor of the sky:

> "Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear..."(29-30)

It appears that the messianic thunderbolt will be the only light in the approaching darkness. After the meteorological catastrophe, when the luminaries of heaven are put out, there is only night, and the wildfire of the world. Jesus suggests a veritable twilight of idols: the gods of traditions withdraw, and God comes to be seen only in what is human – that is, under the "sign of the Son of Man."

Yet this twilight of the gods might also take place within the individual disciple. The destruction of idols would be not just a world-historical event but a person's overcoming of his or her own false gods. I shall argue that Jesus' last sermon proceeds with this deconstruction of deities and reveals a Second Coming in human spirit. This is part of what is meant by the coming of the Kingdom.

Let us continue to cite the rest of Matthew 24-25 in segments. There can be no question of complete explanations, but I shall remark briefly on each.

In the next section, Jesus announces that he is teaching through parable.

> "Now learn the parable (*tein parabolein*) of the fig tree (*sykeis*). When its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near – at the doors! (24:32-33)
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> "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but my Father only. (24:34-36)
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> "But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left. Keep awake (*greigoreite*) therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord (*kurios umon*) is coming.(24:37-42)

We saw a moment ago that the coming of the Son of Man was not necessarily an event to be located in space. There will be no saying 'Look, here it is!' or 'there it is!' Now, with Jesus' reminder of the days of Noah, it appears that the time of the Son of Man is not fixed at one moment either. It is not simultaneous for all individuals. Two women will be grinding: one will be taken and the other left. The Lord who is coming comes to a person in his own time: "...you do not know what hour *your* Lord is coming." Indeed, if the Lord is *not* coming to at least some persons soon it is odd for Jesus to state that this generation will not pass before these things take place. Just as his words never pass away because they are outside the time of creation, so the experience of the Son of Man must be an ever-present possibility. The disciple is transported, however not in a physical sense.

But the most important feature of this text is the image of the fig tree. Learn the parable of the fig tree, Jesus says. When its branch puts forth leaves, we know summer is near. Notice that this formulation does not concern the effect of the summer on the tree. Summer is near but not yet arrived. Rather the tree is changing itself in anticipation of the new season. So perhaps the fig tree does not represent the external signs of what is to come so much as an internal preparation for it. We might reach toward apocalypse the way the fig tree heralds the summer. When we see all these things, Jesus says – the things he is about to recount – we know that apocalypse is near. Does the fig tree instruct us about our own power of vision, our own understanding and its transformation?

That this fig tree should depict the ascent of human spirit would hardly be strange. In scripture, trees and their fruit frequently express human growth and flourishing, either in the collective or in the individual. The prophet Hosea tells us

> I came upon Israel like grapes in the wilderness, I looked on their forefathers with joy like the first ripe figs... (Hos 9:10)

In the gospel of Mark, when a blind man begins to receive his sight, he sees men who

...look like trees, but they are walking about.(Mark 8:24)

In Matthew we are repeatedly told that a poor tree cannot yield good fruit (Matt. 3:18, 7:16-20, 12:33-34); and Jesus asks rhetorically whether figs can be picked from thistles. (7:16) In the text we are considering there is even a play on words to suggest the inward sense of the parable of the fig tree.[4] Matthew's word for "fig tree" in chapter 24, *sykei*, can be taken as a pun on *psychei*, the word for "soul." In Greek Jesus could seem to tell his disciples, "Learn the parable of the soul."

This hypothesis, that the fig tree is human spirit, radically alters our reading of the rest of Jesus' discourse. What has traditionally made the next paragraphs in Matthew so baffling is the impression they give of being simply an assortment of sayings and warnings about the Second Coming. For it appears Jesus proceeds to *other* images besides the fig tree, to other little stories or parables concerning the world's judgement at the end of time. Some editions of the New Testament insert sub-titles like "The Parable of the Ten Maidens," "The Parable of the Talents," "The Parable of the Sheep and Goats." But this misleads readers about the structure of the text. It encourages them to ignore the larger discourse Jesus is unfolding and to read these parables separately, as individual pieces of doctrine. But I think Jesus has a deeper intention. He uses the word "parable" *only once* in this sermon, only when he tells the disciples to learn the parable of the fig tree. On the hypothesis that the fig tree represents human spirit, *there truly is only one parable*, a parable of upward growth that continues to the end of his speech. *All the subsequent images Jesus invokes are really a description of this spiritual growth.* For human awareness evolves by phases. What look like separate parables, the subsidiary images Jesus will run through in the remainder of his discourse, are really these phases. They are so many scenes within a single motion picture of spirit unfolding. Each scene in the sequence, each image of that Kingdom that will come, is really a way of experiencing it, a stage in its coming. Each picture that looks like a separate parable

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[4] Mr. Benjamin Shook first pointed this out to me elsewhere in this gospel.

depicts a *way of thinking* about the Kingdom, and the King. This is how Jesus elaborates his earlier hint about the destruction of idols. He teaches that, as the soul becomes aware of its images of God *as images*, it is set free for movement and opens up to the Eternal in time.

Only the rest of the text can give substance to this proposal.

In the next paragraph we come to the "burglar" that Emily Dickinson mentions in her poem. For in the sequence of personifications of the Son of Man, the first is that of a burglar breaking into a house.

> "But know (*gignoskete*) this, that if the master of the house had known (*eiidei*) at what hour the burglar would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be dug through (or dug across: *diorugeinai*). Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect." (24:43-44)

Jesus begins with a frightful picture: the Son of Man returns like a thief, assaulting the "master of the house" who tries to protect himself. What are we to make of this scene? Freud once said that the essential discovery of psychoanalysis was that the ego was not "master in its own house."[5] I am not so sure about the originality of psychoanalysis on that point. One does not have to be Sigmund Freud to surmise that the "master of the house" in this Gospel passage is a figure of the soul's ordinary consciousness, and that here too this consciousness is under attack.[6] The master of the house would like to know the hour of the break-in, but Jesus is recommending an alternative knowledge. He tells us *to know that the master of the house would like to know the hour.* We are to investigate not the burglar but the frightened master and his futile defenses. The master would like to watch to prevent the psychic invasion – in vain, however, since the burglar

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[5] Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1966), p. 353.

[6] Cf. Matt. 12:29, 13:5, 13:21. In chapter 13 also Jesus uses apocalyptic parable to teach about hidden movements of the soul. See my "A Parable of Scandal: Speculations about the Wheat and Tares in Matthew 13," in *Contagion*, vol. 5 (1998), pp. 98-117.

still succeeds. How should our readiness be different? Jesus proposes that, since the Son of Man always comes when we are not expecting, we need to become aware of what we are not usually aware of. We need to *allow* the thief into the house, *allow* the Son of Man to harrow the soul. In Greek the word for the "digging through" the house that is the thief's work can also be a "digging across". The "thief" tears up the contents of the soul and leaves it divided. The idea seems to be: better the Son of Man come in now with our acknowledgement, better he reveal to us those secrets of ours unknown even to ourselves, than expose us by stealth in the sleep of self-ignorance. Jesus' repeated injunction to be ready and stay awake is not just a threat about the final historical crisis. He calls us to realize the only alternative to the anxiety of judgment. He calls us to self-awareness.

Perhaps this speculation seems far-fetched. But the next segment of Jesus' discourse begins by assuming that one is no longer master in one's own house, and this segment ends by further exposing the divided soul.

> "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. (24:45-47)
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> "But if that bad servant (*o kakos doulos ekeinos*) says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two (*dichotomeisei*) and appoint his portion with the hypocrites. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (24:48-51)

One can read this text as a description of two stewards, one good, one bad. But the text also conveys the possibility that one servant, in two different moments, is being described. Jesus says, "But if *that* bad servant says in his heart...", as if speaking only of an alteration, or another side of the "blessed" one. The corrupted servant seems to be the main interest of the story, since Jesus offers striking details about his bad behavior and punishment. Indeed we should not discount the hidden possibilities of the human

examples, good and bad, Jesus sets before us. Things may not be all they seem at first. The very characters we would reject at each stage in the series – the parts of ourselves we would reject – may be precisely those that, once acknowledged, would carry us to the next level. This is Ms. Linda Wiener's formulation, and it gives us, I think, a profound sense of what Jesus is up to. His initial question here "Who... is a faithful and wise servant?" is a genuinely open question, not to be answered peremptorily.

In fact, Jesus asks, "Who ...is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household to give them food in due season?" He is alluding to Psalm 104:

> The eyes of all, O Lord, wait upon You, that You give them their food in due season. (104:27)

The scriptural allusion suggests that whoever the wise and faithful servant turns out to be, his task is to become more like the lord – giving food in due season. Now the career of the bad servant begins with his loss of faith. He says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming," – which can only mean that he wonders if the lord will return at all. But if the future "wise" servant will be one who has become *like* the lord, it is hard to know if the bad servant's disenchantment is not a stage on the way. After all, the bad servant has put aside the self-protective strategy of the previous character and finds himself instead in a state of longing. Could it be that, after feeling so acutely the master's delay, he attempts, albeit inadequately, to fill this emptiness himself? Will he even acquire in his roundabout way some lordly wisdom about the world? The absence of God might have its compensations.

But the text only indicates that, at this point, the bad servant has thrown himself with abandon into his work and his pleasures. In the ambiguity of God's absence, he has become himself divided. Angered at the void of governance in the world, he has filled the void a little too enthusiastically – beating his fellow servants. On the other hand, taking full advantage of the cosmic anarchy, he indulges himself with his boozy companions as he pleases. Surely there is some comedy in the fact that the returning

master cuts him in two and casts him with the hypocrites.[7] For hypocrisy *is* this psychic division; and such is already the condition of the bad servant, who behaves as abusive tyrant and abject slave. For the present, the lord has come as that visible rift in his soul.

Following this passage on the divided servant are the well-known stories of Matthew 25 – the ones most often lifted out of context and treated as separate parables. Here is the first.

> "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened (*omoiotheisetai*) to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were prudent, and five foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all nodded off and fell asleep. And at midnight a cry occurred: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!' Then all those virgins were aroused (*eigertheisan*) and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the prudent, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us!' But he answered and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.' So keep awake (or, be attentive: *greigoreite)*, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." (25:1-13)

Perhaps even on a first reading we feel uncertain about this story. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of the Eastern Church expresses his doubt succinctly. "Shall I be frank?" he writes. "I do not like the wise virgins. I would have preferred them to give all their oil to the foolish ones, to be cast out for their sakes ...in a generous act of folly..."[8] Rev. Bloom has picked up the scent of Jesus' irony. He recognizes that something is wrong with this picture, and he indicates by a brief note that his suspicion agrees with St. Paul, who

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[7] This reference to hypocrisy, crucial for the whole of Jesus' last sermon, only continues his blasting of hypocrites throughout the Gospel of Matthew. To take the previous chapter alone, see Matt. 23:13, 15, 23, 25, 27-29. The covert theme of hypocrisy in chapters 24 and 25 is thus a fitting test for the disciples!

[8] Anthony Bloom, *Meditations: A Spiritual Journey through the Parables* (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Books, 1971), p. 97

considered forfeiting his own salvation to benefit others (Romans 9:1-3).[9] Now it is of the highest importance to notice that the parable text itself encourages us to scrutinize these prudent virgins, their state of mind, their motives. The story opens: "Then the Kingdom of heaven *will be likened* (or *compared*) to ten virgins..." It *does not say* "The Kingdom of heaven is like this..."(New English Bible). Jesus is representing how people will *conceive* the Kingdom. He is not offering his own perspective, but portraying a temporary and partial idea. In view of his original image of the fig tree, we might say he is examining a fig not quite ripe. That is the point of describing ten maidens not ready for the mystic marriage.

Before proceeding, I should emphasize that the instruction on the surface of these stories in not without its positive value. It is just that, if we only go that far in our reading, and take them as so many pearls of explicit doctrine, we fail to notice the irony that threads the whole of Jesus' discourse. We fail to notice the compassionate smile and the penetrating gaze of the Son of Man.

To be sure, the virgins have something positive to teach. They have attained a more unified condition of soul than the divided servant in the previous picture. Rather than allow their lord's delay to raise doubt about his coming – and give free rein to unruly instincts – the virgins' desire is caught up in the divine wedding. The bad servant's impatient and resentful longing has changed into the virgins' frankly erotic anticipation.

And here we begin to see the problem. Could the virgins' virginity denote an extreme reaction to that kind of wanton behavior described in the previous story? Their very awareness of their virtue and their desire to conserve this virtue may be a bit exaggerated – still anxious and still divisive. The goodness of the once good servant of

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[9] Another saint, Jean Vianney, adopted a similar attitude when he wrote, "I would rather suffer with Jesus Christ than reign with him in heaven." See *Thoughts of the Cure' d'Ars* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, n.d.) June 22/p.32.

the earlier stage has come back – yes, but come back with a vengeance. For vengeance is what we see in the clever five. As Rev. Bloom recognized, the five clever maidens do not mind if their prudence displays the imprudence of the others. After all, what is the evidence that the oil supply would not suffice for all ten? How necessary is that trip of the five foolish ladies to the store? One wonders, when the clever maidens send the imprudent five away on their errand, if these clever ones are entirely free of scheming. These ingenues seem a little disingenuous. Perhaps there is a trace of guile beneath those gossamer veils.

So let us look more closely. The problem with hypocrisy is that neither the perpetrators nor the victims necessarily suspect it. And that would be the case with these ladies. Jesus calls attention – if *we* are paying attention – to their state of unconsciousness. The maidens all doze off before midnight. While they slumber, a cry "occurs" and they are aroused. (The word "aroused" is ambiguous, in Greek as in English, and it is *not* the word Jesus uses to admonish us to keep awake.) Then there is the reputed oil crisis that leads to the preferment of the prudent five. Finally, Jesus exhorts his listeners to stay awake. Now isn't it odd that, after the five prudent virgins are saved in spite of their falling asleep, Jesus tells his *listeners* to wake up and pay attention? Have we missed something? Was the warning supposed to waken us from our own slumber, as if we might well be dreaming the same dream as they?[10] For the implication of Jesus' call to us to wake up is that the virgins in his story are still dreaming their collective dream.

A dream is always revealing. The virgins are dreaming that their marriage to the bridegroom of their soul will be a reward for manifest virtue, virtue discerned against others' inadequacy. But this moralistic dream of the Kingdom is no different from the way of the world, where good habits (generally speaking) are neither impractical nor

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[10] Cf. Bloom, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

unprofitable. The virtue of the five prudent virgins – like so much of what we call "virtue"— comes down to good sense and foresight, symbolized by that additional measure of oil. Alas, the contingency plan of the smart ones is threatened at the eleventh hour. The bridegroom was late, but was he *late enough* to show the prudent five to advantage? The five foolish girls' lights are dwindling, but what if their lamps should *not* go out in time? The prudent ones will have exercised all that prudence for nothing! And those fools have the cheek to ask the prudent ones to share the fuel supply! So the prudent exhibit their prudence once again. They clarify their morally ambiguous predicament with a little morally ambiguous advice: these dullards had better go to the store! I think Jesus' story challenges the false equation of the Kingdom with the discipline of virtue. At some point it becomes evident how little virtue has been its own reward. Is it at the moment the virtuous fear they may not profit from their virtue as they tacitly planned? When it comes to protecting some hard-earned honor, it can be surprisingly easy to act dishonorably.

The King James' Version renders the beginning of the next paragraph of Matthew as follows: "For the Kingdom of Heaven is as a man traveling..." etc. But again the translation gives a misleading impression. In Greek, Jesus' next story opens with no such assertion about the Kingdom. Rather he continues in his hypothetical and ambiguous manner.

> "Now, as it were, a man, traveling to a far country, called his own servants [or slaves: *doulous*] and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents (*talanta*), to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things,

I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'(25:14-21)

"He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' (22-23)

"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' " (25:24-30)

Now where, one must ask, is the hypocrisy in this famous tale of the talents? If it is anywhere, surely it is in the fellow who received the one talent and produced no surplus. For the lord points out that if this nervous fellow believed the owner would demand a return on his deposit, logically he should not have gone and buried it but should have put it in a savings bank. The fellow with one talent has been caught in what rigorous thinkers call a contradiction. But let us not judge hastily. The master reaps where he has not sown. The hapless beneficiary has planted his talent in the soil as if it should grow there. I do not think it beyond Jesus' wit to raise a question in this way about our unconscious confusion of a cultural or social process with a natural one. If we can entertain this possibility we may begin to see that the little guy's hypocrisy is not the most interesting kind.

But first let us observe the positive elements in this new image of the Kingdom. The maidens in the previous story were supposed simply to wait, ever ready to meet the bridegroom. But those who receive the talents face a more open field of action; the lord does not specify what he expects of them. Nonetheless, two of the capitalists discover on their own one of the secrets of creation. Smart investment is a capacity to let go for a

time; and they find that, through the right way of letting go, things develop spontaneously of themselves. Their living is easy. So these successful investors are more secure than the anxious maidens. No schemes enter *their* heads for getting an edge over the competitors.

Incidentally, the word "talent" (*talanta* in Greek) which in this story means a sum of silver, is the historical source of our English word "talent" –meaning an individual's native gifts. The derivative idea, that a person's inherited character is a unique opportunity that repays a little judicious expenditure, is true to the worldly wisdom in this text. Human beings are exhorted to enjoy the creative power hidden within.

The story of the talents is also a quick sketch of what people call the "loser." A "loser," in the technical sense of the term, is not someone who happens to fail. A "loser" is someone who tends to *make* himself fail through the expectation and fear of failure. The master in the story expresses this sad truth. "From him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away." The man with one talent feels too acutely the comparison with his fellows. His subjective feeling of "not having" causes him to forfeit what he has. He annihilates his modest chance in life by the defeatism that imagines he has nothing at all.

Yet this does not seem to be the full perspective of Jesus, the teller of the tale. Notice that here he does not formulate the lesson about the have-nots himself but places it *in* the story, in the master's mouth. The idea of letting the have-nots take the heat, so to speak, is not quite Jesus' idea. True, the "loser" proceeded illogically, as the master was quick to point out. But the master's own logic, or at least his arithmetic, is far from perfect. There is a howler in the premise of his benefaction, as stated in the initial conditions. The lord allegedly assigns the talents to his servants "each according to his ability." But the two successful characters, the ones allotted two and five talents respectively, turn out to have identical skills in financial management. Each doubles his

capital. The story does not ratify the lord's original judgement about ability. Nor can we see a reason for his assignment of the loser's talent to the man with ten.[11]

I suspect that Jesus' discernment, and his arithmetic, are not so poor; and that instead, through his story, he points to the irrationality of the advantages of the advantaged. The "loser" may be overly debilitated by his lowly position. But the successful parties overlook the arbitrariness of their head starts, which gave them their confidence in the world. Do we really think it is co-incidence when the ultimate rewards turn out, as in the story, to correspond with the initial advantages? Jesus has caught us in the subtlest hypocrisy, subtlest because it is collectively concealed in an economy that seems blameless and natural. Those who are made to feel the likelihood of success have a correspondingly greater stake in the system. This greater stake is reflected in the fact that the lord will depend on those richer servants to throw out the poor investor.[12] "Cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness."[13] Jesus hints at the unexamined collusion between those who benefit from a particular human order and that order's god. Once we have doubted the harsh god of the successful, we may decide to give up -- along with Emily Dickinson -- the theology of the banker.

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[11] Surely it was with an eye to this text of Matthew that the 17th-century Jesuit philosopher Baltasar Gracian wrote, "In our world nothing is given except to those who have the most. Many are stripped of their possessions because they are poor, and see them given to others because they are wealthy... The rich inherit and the poor have no relations... He that has nothing shall have nothing." *A Pocket Mirror for Heroes*, trans. C. Maurer (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 85-86.

[12] It is significant that the Greek term *doulos*, used in the story of the good/bad servant in Matthew 24, and used here for the servants receiving the talents, can as well be translated "slave," therefore adding to Jesus' irony in presenting these images of the Kingdom.

[13] The harshness of the lord, which the man with one talent anticipates, is therefore confirmed in fact by the lord's condemnation. The unwary reader who accepts this conclusion with no compunction also accepts (notwithstanding his better opinion of himself) the condemned man's way of thinking. The reader's condemnation is still partly hypocritical.

One result of interrogating these well-contrived stories of Matthew's Jesus, and of bearing their context in mind, is that we begin to see the irony in them, an irony that permits opposing perspectives, an irony that generates tension and movement. Each little story represents a broadening of human vision of the Kingdom but also the blind spot in that vision that a little questioning begins to correct. Simplicity of heart and an intricate knowledge of human self-justification thus combine in Jesus' speech. The hypothesis of his irony, of course, makes us uneasy. We fear we have been deceived; our impressions of Jesus and of ourselves are in danger. But unless we acknowledge deception there is no enlightenment. Lightning too is dangerous when it strikes, and yet we come to delight in that dazzle that is never so harsh as to injure our sight.

In any case, it would be a mistake to assume that Jesus' words always have an ironic sense. Take his last story, the story of the sheep and goats. Its opening is marked: Jesus breaks with his previous tone.

> "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate (*aphorisei*) the people, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And he will set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...'

(Notice the word "kingdom" has only now been asserted positively, as well of the idea of the "fatherhood" of God, which corresponds to the "Father" in Dickinson's poem.)

> '... for I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.' Then the righteous will answer (*apokritheisontai)* him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and take you in, or naked and clothe you? Or when did we see you sick, or in prison, and come to you?' And the King will answer (*apokritheis)* and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' (25:31-40)
>
> "Then he will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was

> hungry and you gave me no food; I was thirsty and you gave me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take me in, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (25:41-46)

This story completes the sequence of images Jesus has put before us. Let us see how.

First of all, when the King discloses his solidarity with the "least" of his brethren, the text quietly sets aside the god of the talents who condemned the little guy. Indeed the whole story of the sheep and goats makes the world's idea of success and failure irrelevant. Not a word here about the unfortunate ones' responsibility for the bad situation in which they are found. How unnerving is the King's report when he says, for example, "I was in prison!" He does not say, "I was completely innocent and ended up in prison." Typically, Matthew's Jesus touches on the most complicated of problems by the simplest of means – in this case, the problem of society's relation to the criminal. But we can have little clue about such implications if we have misunderstood Jesus' progressive disclosure of human presumption: the disappointed believer who now trusts only in force; the prudent maidens who turn their virtue into a weapon; and, most disturbing of all, the investors of the talents who, as long as someone else is at the bottom of the ladder, assist the god of worldly advantages. All these efforts to distance ourselves from frailty and failure — to refuse sickness and even crime as any part of ourselves – perhaps these separations had to have their season. But from the perspective of the story of the sheep and goats they are now suspect. God himself does not play the Almighty as his all too human creatures do. He reveals himself in a Son of Man who is not merely one particular man but all humanity's brokenness and distress.

But what of the fact that the sheep and goats acted by mere instinct? Neither the sheep nor the goats acted by knowledge; all were surprised by the King's identification

with human affliction. How can they be rewarded or condemned for their responses to the little ones? I think that if we look closely we can see that there is more in the picture. The puzzlement expressed by the sheep and the goats is not as senseless as it first seems. There are different ways of being unaware; and the difference between the sheep and goats shows us something important about hypocrisy. Perhaps it also shows us the alternative path.

Both the sheep and the goats ask the King, "When did we see you...?" But their past actions dictate that the two groups cannot be expressing the same doubt, nor revealing the same thing about themselves. The sheep are asking, "When did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink, or in prison and visit you?" Their question wonders whether they have *ever* done *any* of these deeds. They question their own positive action, their effectiveness in the world, their having achieved anything to solace the King's sufferings. Of course, it turns out that they had only to do something for one of his least brethren and they did it for him. The goats necessarily imply something different. They inquire about when they saw the King hungry or thirsty or naked or in prison and did *not* minister to him. That is, the logic of their question, questioning their failure to act, implies that maybe they *always* did *all* of these things. There is a logical difference, which amounts to a psychological difference, between the sheep and the goats. It is the difference that precisely shows forth hypocrisy – hypocrisy even in an etymological sense. For hypocrisy – *hypokrisis* in Greek – can describe an insufficiency of judgment by failing to turn one's judgment to oneself. That is what the goats have failed to do: they have not questioned their own ungenerous hearts and so they question the King's imputation now.

The text indicates in another way that such a difference is visible in the sheep's and goats' questions. For, before they ask their questions, the text says each time, surprisingly, "...and they will *answer*..." How is their question an "answer"? The Greek word used here, *apokrinomai*, I think gives us a clue. *Apokrinomai* is the same as the

word for "separating" – not the external act of setting different species apart (*aphoridzo*) which the King does like the shepherd – but rather a self-activated separation. The suggestion is that the sheep and goats *are separating themselves* by these simple questions which are also their "answers." Their "answers" reveal and distinguish them. The text says that the King will then "answer" them, too. By answering the sheep's and goats' "answers," it appears that the truth is reflected back to them so they themselves will see it. (Cf. Rev. 1:7) Indeed, after the King's answer, the sheep and goats go their separate ways. Notice: the sheep do not cast the goats out as their counterparts do in the earlier stories. The goats go away on their own. Have they now judged themselves in the light of the Kingdom? [14]

Jesus' apocalyptic discourse is complete. He has confided to the disciples something of his wisdom about the unfolding of human spirit. Like the fig tree, spirit matures with time, opens its flowers of divine awareness, and (in the words of the psalm) shares its fruit in due season. By this dynamic image, Jesus depicts a metamorphosis of the soul, a metamorphosis distinct from the outward systems of good and bad that would fix the soul in a moral identity, in self-satisfaction, or in self-defeat. The parable of the fig tree sets our moral ideas in motion, it takes them up in a continuous, ever more encompassing growth. It is no accident that Jesus' sequence of secondary images expands outward: from a master of a house, to a household with its staff of servants, to a

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[14] Perhaps their free departure represents a soul's moment of recognition of its own past sins, and its consent to consume them in the fires of suffering, the furnace of death that burns even now. In a remarkable book, *The Diary of a Russian Priest*, Alexander Elchaninov writes, "However just and pure a man may be, there is always an element of sin in him which cannot enter the Kingdom of God and which must be burned up. Our sins are burned up by our sufferings." (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Press, 1982), p. 27. Hence, like eternal life, "everlasting fire" encompasses the present time and a soul's experience in the present. Is this the meaning behind the "baptism in fire" mentioned in Matthew 3:11?

wedding that unites households, to an impersonal economy of investment and profit, and finally to all the nations of the earth.

Yet Jesus' instruction does not end here. Matthew's Gospel follows up Jesus' last parable with an extremely significant episode. It is as if the evangelist would take the ever-ascending thought of the parable to a yet higher viewpoint – higher but in no way remote. The evangelist would show us the divine agony and the divine succor in the immediate present, and not just as something realized in an afterworld when a soul beholds its past in shame. By way of conclusion, let us consider a few more lines.

> Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished all these sayings, that he said to his disciples, "You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified. . ." (26:1-2)
>
> And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came up to him having an alabaster jar of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it (*katekeen*) on his head as he sat at the table. But when his disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor." But knowing what they were up to, Jesus said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a beautiful deed for me. For you have the poor with you always, but me you do not have always. For in pouring this fragrant oil on my body, she did it for my burial." (26:6-12)

Readers who have grown aware of the subtle continuity of the gospel text, and who have just examined the sheep and goats parable, will not have a hard time guessing where the disciples' indignation on behalf of the poor has come from. They learned it — or thought they learned it — from Jesus' private instruction. Like many of Matthew's readers, the disciples seem to have extracted the sheep and goat story from its dynamic context and made of it a watermark of their piety, and their authority. They know the law of charity now. And so they are eager to separate this goat from among the sheep, to expel this woman from their company of true discipleship. In this the disciples are correct. They *are* sheep and she *is* the goat – although not in the sense they imagine. For the woman who never heard Jesus' apocalyptic discourse is much closer to him in spirit, and she accepts the role of scapegoat of these woolly-headed followers. Here the irony

of the Gospel is transparent. The disciples have demonstrated the pious hypocrisy about which, without their realizing it, Jesus had attempted to enlighten them. In telling them they have the poor, but not him, always with them, he gives them another chance to grasp his essential idea. He gently suggests that . . . perhaps they have already made of his teaching a useful abstraction, while they fail to notice the affliction present before them.

Meanwhile, we hear the melodious silence of the woman. There is a mystery in that simple phrase "...a woman came up to him," a hint of intimacy between her and Jesus. The text refuses to shed light on it, as if to insist that it is only that immediate and implicit understanding of two persons who will always recognize each other because they know the cost of the most costly things. Is that not what her gesture declares? She "pours out" (*katekeen*) her fragrant oil just as Jesus will say on the next page that his blood that forgives sins is "poured out" (*ekkunnomenon*). (26:28) [15] She knows the poverty that is an emptying of the spirit, a total expenditure of one's certainties, one's gods, oneself. The woman is a poet. And her mute poetry, her language of signs, says even more. This funerary rite, performed on the head of a man who is not yet a corpse, is also a spontaneous rite of baptism. She has transformed the acknowledgement of death into a recognition of rebirth and supreme life, that may be felt in the very void of that acknowledgement. The woman has understood – we do not know how – she has understood what Jesus has taught about a receptivity to the world's anguish, and the gift of oneself to death. She therefore recognizes in him a fragility that will never break, a powerlessness that overpowers dread. She freely empties her vessel.

Jesus' final remark is a counter-recognition of the woman's recognition of his message. We should reflect on it well.

> "Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of as a memorial to her." (26:13)

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[15] The Greek words *ekkeo* and *katakeo* use the same root.

At the moment when Jesus' personal ministry is about to be extinguished, he declares the endurance and inseparability of his word and the woman's deed. Her gesture is an utterance of the divine language – simple, unpredictable, spilling over with meaning. Jesus marks the eternal moment. For an instant, he is not merely the central character in Matthew's Gospel: he ruptures the very confines of the story. He speaks over the heads of his disciples and even his narrator, to reach the eavesdroppers of future time.

> "Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of as a memorial to her."

In a single remark, in a flash, Jesus breaks out of the world of the text and into a world that does not yet exist, the world of those who will hear his voice and understand. Suddenly he is not in that inner room – but like lightning that comes out of the east.

Acknowledgement:
The author wishes to express his gratitude to Maryanne Hoeffner-Cornell, Linda Wiener, Daryl Koehn, Malcolm Moncrieff Wallop, Astrida Orle Tantillo, and Keven Schnadig for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.