

Restore the Economy of Grace
Matthew 25:14-30
Rev. Loren McGrail
Irondequoit United Church of Christ
November 15,2020

Once upon a time there was a billionaire. He'd had a grueling year, what with the collapse of world markets and threats of wars from Asia to the Middle East, and now several congressional hearings trying to challenge the new tax proposal as unfair and unjust because it would deprive the rest of the population of basic social services. He decided he needed to go the islands and take some time off for some golf, rest and relaxation. But before he went away he called in his three investors, his servants, and asked them to take care of his investment funds.

Taking into account the relative abilities of each of the three, he gave one of them five million dollars, one of them two million, and the other one, one million. The one which received the five million got straight to work buying and selling and managed to make five million more. He invested in companies extracting oil from the tar sands of Alaska, and fracking project near schools. Thanks to his political maneuvering against solar power and windmills he made a killing in the energy companies.

The second investor who had received the two million also managed to make a hundred percent profit by sending all his profits from investments in overseas companies with poor labor polices to the Bahamas to avoid paying corporate taxes.

The third investor knew how his boss made money by destroying the environment, by investing in companies that underpaid their workers, and by not paying his fair share of taxes. His conscience would not allow him to continue to play this game of exploitation so he locked the money he was given in a safe and left it there.

After the Billionaire's undeserved vacation, he returned and called the three in to present their performance reports. The one who had doubled the five million was told, "Well done. I am going to put you in charge of even bigger investments." The second one who had also doubled his investment was also told, "Well done. I am going to reward you with even bigger investments."

Finally the one who had received one million made his report, saying, "Boss, I know how you wanted me to make a profit by lying and cheating others, but I just couldn't do it so I locked it away and am returning it to you."

At this, the boss went crazy saying, "You lazy good for nothing slacker! So you knew that I am only too happy to reap the profits from other people's work, did you? Well, you should have at least deposited the money in the bank so I could have earned a little bit of interest. So now I am going to take that one million I gave you and give it to the other two who know how to make a profit because everyone who can show something for what they are given will be given even more. But those, like you, with nothing to show will be stripped of even the little you have and tossed out like garbage. Nobody will hire you and you will become homeless.

This is my interpretation of today's Gospel on the parable of the talents. In the United States this parable is often preached around stewardship Sunday as a way to get congregants to tithe more or give more of their talents to serve on committees. Talents have often been interpreted wrongly as skills or gifts God has given you. However, in the time of Jesus a talent was a sum of money that weighed 80 to a 130 pounds. A talent, then, was worth about 20 years of a person's labor. The only people who had this kind of money were traders running import and export businesses and charging interest on loans to poor people who were trying to live off the land. Trading required the master to travel often and leave his household in the hands of his servants who would collect the debts and keep the books. The master encouraged this making money from money. The system worked as long as you didn't notice or mind if the master never really worked or reaped what he sowed.

In our parable today the two servants are fine working within this exploitive system. They were good and trustworthy slaves while the third slave was treated harshly for his refusal to cooperate in his Master's corrupt practices and for calling him out on his exploitation and oppression. His ultimate defiance was to bury the money in the master's own kitchen garden.

This parable, then, is not a prescription on how we all need to use our time, talent or treasures. It's rather a description of how the economic system of capital worked when household servants were the primary interface between Jewish peasantry and Roman authority. It is a cautionary tale about the mercenary selfishness of the debt system and also about what happens when you refuse to play the game, when you speak truth to power.

The parable is about what the kin-dom of God is **not** like because God is not this harsh master of exploitive economic policies who is ready to dismember the common good for his own gain. God does not condone usury. God wants us to become co-creators in restoring the economy of grace.

Jesus is reminding his disciples, and us, that the God of Exodus; the one who heard the groans of his people enslaved, is also our God. He is reminding them and us, that like the third slave who refused to invest in the game of exploitation, he too will be cast out into the darkness. Furthermore, he wants us to join him in this place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The third slave, the one who does not cooperate, who dares to disobey is the hero. In a world where the world's richest 1% own over ½ of the world's global wealth, where they can shelter their profits in paradise islands to avoid taxes, who are the third slaves? Do you know any?

Who are the brave souls or organizations who dare to buck the economic, social, or political systems of our time? Who are the ones who prosper the work of every generous hand? as the theologian Ken Sehested says in our litany today inspired by Psalm 90.

They are the ones like the Malibu Methodist Church who fed the homeless against a city ordinance demanding them to stop because they were increasing the homeless population.

They are the ones like Colin Kaepernick, the quarterback who took a knee against police brutality during the singing of the national anthem. He was immediately removed from the team for the boldness of his reverent action. His action inspired other football players throughout the country. Like Mohammad Ali who was locked out of boxing for his stand against the Viet Nam war, Colin refuses to apologize or back down.

Furthermore, taking a knee has become a gesture of reverence and defiance for other important causes. Clergy from different faith traditions took a knee against all expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure and the rolling back of standards. Their witness and willingness to get arrested for the cause led them to be cast out into the darkness of jail cells across the country.

Like the third slave, all of these individuals and groups have refused to participate in corrupt or exploitive systems. Their solidarity or witness has been costly. They are people of conscience.

So, you see Dear Ones our gospel parable is not just a cautionary tale about what is going to happen to Jesus but what we can expect if we truly see the image of God in each other and act on it.

The good news is that you will not be in the darkness alone. You will find others. You will also find God there. Remember God found Gideon in a hole, Joseph in a prison, and Daniel in a lion's den. God has a curious habit of showing up in the midst of trouble, good trouble, not in its absence. Where the world sees failure, God sees a future. And whether this is good or bad news, remember that God also tends to recruit from the pit, not the thrones of power.

Do not be afraid of being cast out, you will be in the company of all who are working to "prosper the work of every generous hand" to restore God's economy of grace.