

November 19, 2023
“Truth to Power”
Psalm 90:1-6, 12 / Matthew 25:14-30
Pastor Tim

“The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. ... If there is no struggle, there is no progress. ... Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

That's Frederick Douglass, of course, the great American abolitionist and orator. From a speech given in August of 1857, in the context of an anti-slavery gathering and a celebration of the end of slavery in the British occupied and so-called “West Indies” 23 years earlier.

A speech in which he uses that revolutionary event to condemn the reality that slavery yet continued, unabated, in the United States.

“Now, my friends, how has this great act of freedom and benevolence been received in the United States? How has our American Christian Church and our American Democratic Government received this glorious new birth of National Righteousness?”

Douglass imagines, based on the founding national professions of virtue, that “it might have been expected that a shout of joy and gladness would have shook the hollow sky, that loud hallelujahs would have rolled up to heaven from all our borders ...”

“Alas,” he continues, “no such responsive note of rejoicing has reached my ear, except from a part of the colored people and their few white friends. As a nation, we are deaf, dumb, and blind to the moral beauty and transcendent sublimity of West India Emancipation.”

It's a speech in which he goes on to castigate the moral depravity of a nation – a “slave-cursed country” he calls it – guided above all else by the capitalist pursuit of wealth at any cost. A pursuit used, in concert with white supremacy racism, to justify the horror of slavery and human suffering.

And so he writes, “But the first and last question, and the only question which we Americans have to press in the premises, is the great American question, *will it pay?* Can money be made out of it? Will it make the rich richer, and the strong stronger? How will it affect property? In the eyes of such people, there is no God but wealth; no right and wrong but profit and loss.”

Will it pay?

It is an incredibly powerful speech, one of many that Douglas delivered in his lifetime.

Power concedes nothing without a demand. Revolution requires resistance. And resistance, if it is to interrupt and ultimately dismantle powerful systems and structures, requires solidarity.

Which brings us to our Gospel reading this morning. Yet another parable from Jesus. This one is from Matthew, though there’s a markedly different version found in Luke.

You heard it, as Emily just read for us. A man goes out on journey; in Luke’s account, a “nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return” – making explicit what Matthew only implies.

We know he is a man of great wealth. And so great power.

Back to Matthew, before the man leaves, he gathers his “slaves” – those who would’ve functioned within the hierarchy of his household as “retainers.” Here the translation as slaves is perhaps misleading; the important take-away is that they were completely dependent on the goodwill of their patron.

But they did have some power of their own within that hierarchy.

The owner, the patron, the master, was among those who were, as biblical scholar William Herzog notes, “the agents by whom the wealth of the land ... was harvested, gathered into storage, redistributed or monetized, and exported.”

The head of the household had to travel if he wanted to expand his business and influence. If he wanted to grow his wealth.

Will it pay?

And so when he was gone, Herzog writes, “he needed to entrust important portions of (his wealth) to his household retainers.”

So the man gathers his retainers; in this case three of them. And he distributes to them, we’re told, “each according to his ability.”

Now this is where we start to get pulled toward the traditional interpretation of the parable. This is where the parable becomes nothing more than a story about what we do with the abilities we’ve been given.

In Matthew, the fact that the retainers are given “talents” only reinforces this understanding. The English word, talent, comes from the Greek used here, but a talent in Greek, of course, wasn’t a talent as we understand it – an aptitude or skill.

It was a whole bunch of money. Roughly 15 years’ wages for a day laborer.

This is not a test; it’s an investment. Will it pay?

In the traditional and superficial, surface-level reading of the parable, God is the “man” in the parable – the “nobleman,” the head of the household. And God has gifted to each of us abilities, talents. And so the parable plays out as a simple lesson about what we do – or don’t – with that those abilities. Those talents.

You heard the story. One gets five and made five more. Another gets two, and likewise, made two more. And the third, the third gets one and buries it. Does nothing, and so makes nothing more.

The first two are rewarded by the master for their efforts – again, the master understood in this reading as God. The third is punished.

Allegory for the final judgment. The reckoning. What have you done – or not – with your abilities, your talents, with what God has given you, in this life?

And so we get what many scholars see as an editorial addition by the author of Matthew's gospel. Verse 29. A quick and dirty summary presumably from the author's, not Jesus', lips.

"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

And while there is some value to be gained from such a lesson, there's so much more to it. Again, Jesus didn't use parables to then tie it all up with a simple Cliff-Notes take-away. Do Cliff Notes still exist, by the way?!

As we have been exploring, Jesus used parables to make people – and especially those who were marginalized and oppressed by the dual power structures of Rome and Jerusalem, politics and religion – think for themselves. See for themselves. Dream for themselves and each other.

Jesus used parables to inspire imagination. To subvert the way things were and point to the way they could yet be. The way of God.

Jesus used parables as code. And so Jesus, always, invites us to go below the surface.

If all you wanted to do with a story was make the basic point that we are called to make as much good use out of our talents and abilities as we can, that with power and privilege comes responsibility, you could just tell a story, say, about a parent giving allowances to their children. Or something sweet and simple like that.

But Jesus doesn't do that. Again, Jesus sets a scene that would've been all too familiar to his target audience, most of them poor and destitute. A structure based primarily on capitalist exploitation.

Will it pay?

The first two retainers are identical; only the math is different. They take their talents and double the investment, and in so doing, simply do what they're supposed to do within

the larger economic system. Their primary job is to make more money for their patron, their master.

Presumably, based on the master's response to these two, doubling your money was the reasonable expectation. Note that they are given no instruction on what to do with their talents. They receive the talents and the master leaves. They clearly know what they're supposed to do.

And while the retainers were dependent on their master, they had opportunity within their charge to increase their own wealth – by any means necessary. Ideally making more than double so they could pocket the difference for themselves.

That was the game. “They are always walking a tightrope,” Herzog suggests, “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.”

He goes on, “Not only do the retainers do his dirty work, exploiting others for profit, but they siphon off anger that would otherwise be directed at him and his class.”

The first two play by the rules of this game, and so they are rewarded accordingly: “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

They are given more power, but again, still, power within the confines of the household bureaucracy. Their livelihoods are still wholly dependent on the master, and their worth, their value, measured by the “joy of their master.”

Herzog again: “(They) are never allowed to forget who is the source of their patronage.”

And so we come to the third retainer. The focus of the parable.

Jesus has set it up for us. One and two do the same thing, so why wouldn't the third go another way?

On the surface, within the traditional reading, he's the outcast. The one who fails to play by the rules. And so the one who is harshly punished by his master.

But UNDER the surface, within the coded language of the parable, he is the hero.

He protects the master's investment, but does nothing to increase it. By burying the talent he's been given, he takes it out of exploitative capitalist circulation. He refuses to play by the rules of the game.

And not only that, he steps WAY out of line and confronts the master. He exposes the rules of the game. He dares to speak TRUTH to POWER.

"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

Note that the master never denies the third retainer's accusation; he simply shifts his energy to putting the retainer in his place, stigmatizing and labeling him as "wicked" and "lazy." Driving a wedge between this retainer and the other "good and faithful" two.

Again, with the traditional surface reading, lazy and wicked is exactly what the third retainer is. He reaps what HE sows.

But within the coded, below-the-surface reading Jesus has in mind for those with ears to hear, he's a whistleblower. The one with the courage to speak truth to power, to call out an exploitative economic system where, in Frederick Douglass' words, "there is no God but wealth; no right and wrong but profit and loss."

Will it pay?

Like many, or most, whistleblowers, it doesn't pay off for this third retainer. What's often read, in verse 30, as an allegory for eternal punishment – "thrown into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" – is, as Herzog points out, really just "a description of the life of the poor."

This third retainer had managed to work his way up to some level of power within the economic system, within the household hierarchy. But at some point along the way he's seen the system, the hierarchy, for what it is.

He can and he will no longer play by its rules.

He, Herzog writes, "dissociates himself from the system." As the hero of the parable, "he 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, makes known what has been hidden beneath the mystifications of the elites ..."

In so doing, he claims his power – even knowing, of course, that he will pay a price.

And Jesus, in so sharing the parable, invites those who would hear to imagine another way – to imagine the reward beyond the price. Again, to subvert the way things were and point to the way they could yet be. The kingdom of God.

Turns out God is not a greedy capitalist, or a man for that matter. Amen!

He lifts up the third retainer as a prototype for the sacrifice, the struggle, in Douglass' words, necessary for progress.

Revolution requires resistance. Revolution of the very systems and structures we so often take for granted requires resistance. Requires speaking truth to power.

The third retainer resists, speaks truth to power, and is severely punished for it.

And so Jesus' invitation, I think, goes even further.

The whistleblower, as is often the case, acts alone – and is vulnerable in doing so. Through coded parable, Jesus is calling those who would hear – those who would imagine with him another way, a different way, a better way, a just and peaceful way, a way marked by shared wealth and prosperity – to solidarity with the whistleblower.

He said what you always wanted to say, so don't let his act of courage be in vain. Let it inspire your own. What will you do with your power?

Resistance, if it is to interrupt and ultimately dismantle powerful political, economic and religious systems and structures, requires solidarity. Solidarity builds power – solidarity with those who are most powerless, and across all lines of social identity and status. People power.

Frederick Douglass also said in that speech, more than 160 years ago, before the American Civil War:

Egypt died in the sight of all her imposing wealth and her everlasting Pyramids. The polished stone is there, but Egypt is gone. Greece has vanished, her life disappeared as it were, in a trance of artistic beauty and architectural splendor. Great Babylon, the mother of harlots and the abominations of the earth, fell in the midst of barbaric wealth and glory. The lesson taught by the history of nations is that the preservation or destruction of communities does not depend upon external prosperity. (We) do not live by bread alone, so with nations. (We) are not saved by art, but by honesty. Not by the gilded splendors of wealth, but by the hidden treasure of (human) virtue.

We are saved by honesty.

Speaking truth to power, in solidarity, and so joining and so finding our collective power to make way for another way, a different way, a better way, a just and peaceful way. A way marked by shared wealth and prosperity. People and the planet before profit. The very kingdom of God.

What will you do with your power?

There is no progress without struggle. May it be so.