

## The Parable of the Fearful Investor

Matthew 25:14-30 ~ Proper 28, Year A

*A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 13, 2011 by the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor*

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If you came here this morning in any doubt about what season it is, this morning's gospel lesson is your clue. As any longtime churchgoer can attest, when the parable of the talents shows up in church, it is stewardship season. It's time to consider how much God has given you so you can decide how much to give back—not only so places like this will be here the next time you want to come but also because it is good for you to let go of some of what you have on a regular basis.

That is the sort of thing you might hear in a place like Duke Chapel, but come to one of the churches in my part of the world and you may hear something a little more forceful, such as, “Don't give until it hurts. Give until it feels good. Aim to double God's investment in you so that you don't wind up like servant #3--not just wicked and lazy but *worthless*—unworthy of any response save the effort it takes to throw him into the outer darkness--while servants #1 and #2 enter into the joy of their master.”

The meaning of this parable has been established in most people's minds for so long that there's hardly anything left to say about the third servant that hasn't already been said. Here is a brief survey.

C. H. Dodd (1935): this is “a story of a man whom overcaution and cowardice led into a breach of trust.”

T. W. Manson (1949): “The punishment for neglected opportunity is deprivation of opportunity.”

Dan Via (1967): the third servant's refusal to risk led to repressed guilt, resulting in “the loss of the opportunity for meaningful existence.”

John Donahue (1988): “out of fear of failure, he refused even to try to succeed.”<sup>1</sup> Any questions?

The unanimous weight of these verdicts reminds me of something I heard in a homeless shelter once, from a man who had been on the receiving end of a great deal of good Christian advice about how to get back on his feet. After being coached on handling his addiction, applying for jobs, managing his finances, and qualifying for low-income housing, he finally looked at the person most invested in his rehabilitation and said, “Why you want to fix me up and feed me back into the same machine that grind me up in the first place?”

How you hear a parable has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from.

Back in the 1980's, the Catholic Foreign Missionary Society of America published a four-volume commentary called *The Gospel in Solentiname*. As some of you know, Solentiname is a place name, a remote archipelago on Lake Nicaragua inhabited by subsistence level farmers and fishers. In the late 1970's, a lay monastery called Our Lady of Solentiname flourished on one of its 38 islands—the living vision of pastor Ernesto Cardenal.

On Sundays the priest in the black beret invited the *campesinos* of Solentiname to meet with him to talk about the gospel reading for the week—not *after* the sermon, but *in place* of the

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to William R. Herzog II, author of *Parables as Subversive Speech*, for this list as well as for every other good idea in this sermon (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 152.

sermon. It was such an unusual idea that people came. Those with boats rowed to meet him while those who did not stayed home, but the meetings themselves became legendary.

By one account,<sup>2</sup> as many as a thousand people showed up to give voice to the gospel in Solentiname--young and old, male and female, literate and illiterate. Across all their differences, what they had in common was life below the poverty line and the revolution going on around them—a popular uprising against then-president Somoza, whose family controlled 40% of Nicaragua’s economy in those days and 30% of the country’s arable land.<sup>3</sup>

You cannot visit the monastery today, I am afraid, because in 1977 Somoza’s National Guard burned it down. But you can read the commentaries that were produced there, including one on the parable of the talents. On the Sunday it came up, a Colombian poet named William started the discussion by saying, “That’s a lousy parable.”

Unfazed, Pastor Cardenal asked him why it was lousy. Here is an excerpt of the discussion that followed:

WILLIAM: “Because it’s about speculating with money: something we all condemn, like putting money out at interest; giving the money to others so they can work and work with it and hand over the profits to the owner of the money.”

[CARDENAL]: “It’s really a very ugly example that Jesus gives of exploitation, of speculation with money, of pure capitalism.”

AIDAN: “Well, he probably didn’t say it. Who knows who said it.”

And later:

WILLIAM: “Well, I don’t know. Besides, the example is lousier because of what the servant says who hid the money: that he was a hard master, that he gathered where he hadn’t put anything, that he harvested and didn’t sow.”

TERESITA, his wife: “At that time there were only masters and servants, right? He had to talk like that so they’d understand. At that time all the servants had to be working with the master’s talents or money, and that’s why he had to give that example.”

[CARDENAL]: He was seeing the exploitation there was in the society of his time, and that’s going on now—much worse with the banks and finances of today.”

WILLIAM: “There’s the bank, there’s a bank there!”<sup>4</sup>

Did you know that in the United States today, seven banks hold assets equal to 66% of the Gross Domestic Product? Twenty years ago the figure was 18%. Today 1% of Americans hold 39% of the nation’s wealth and take 25% of its annual income. Twenty years ago the figures were half that.<sup>5</sup> But wait! We’re in church, so let’s stick to the Bible.

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<sup>2</sup> “The Island of Solentiname,” accessed 11/11/11 from Stanford University.

[http://www.stanford.edu/group/arts/nicaragua/discovery\\_eng/history/solentiname.html](http://www.stanford.edu/group/arts/nicaragua/discovery_eng/history/solentiname.html)

<sup>3</sup> “Nicaraguan Revolution,” *Wikipedia*, accessed 11/11/11.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel in Solentiname, Volume 4*, Ernesto Cardenal, tr. Donald D. Walsh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> “The case against Wall Street” by Gary Dorrien, *Christian Century* (November 15, 2011), 22-29.

In Jesus' day, a talent weighed between 80 and 130 pounds and was worth roughly twenty years' worth of an ordinary person's labor. The only people who had that kind of money were the wealthy elite, whose households were the basic economic units of the time. How did they get the money? The usual ways: they engaged in trade, got goods to market, ran import-export businesses, lent money to people at interest—especially land-poor people who often had trouble trying to make ends meet at the end of a long drought, or a catastrophic illness in the family.

Wealthy householders were happy to help out in circumstances like those. There was nothing to it: if you were strapped for cash, you got the best interest rate you could, you put up your land as collateral, and you got busy bringing in the sheaves. By the time you noticed what 60% interest really meant, it was too late. Your land went into foreclosure, and quicker than you could say, "Leviticus" it was not yours anymore—but that did not always mean you had to leave. You could also stay, as long as you were willing to work for your former lender—and if you could stand to watch your family's fields re-purposed as olive groves, or vineyards—something more easily monetized, that would appeal to a more upscale market at home and abroad.<sup>6</sup>

(Is anything sounding familiar here?)

Since "abroad" was where first century financiers often had to be, they employed household retainers to look after things while they were gone—"slaves," perhaps, but well placed ones—domestic bureaucrats in charge of managing workers, keeping books, collecting debts—who were also free to make a little something for themselves on the side once they had seen to their master's interests. Their share in such candid graft reflected their own standing in the household. The higher-ups were entrusted with more than the lower-downs, but as far as the master was concerned, the more the merrier, since that meant they would all keep eye on one another while he was away.

Whatever the servants' standing, their dependence on the master was built into the system. They lived on his excess. The better he did, the better they did. Their wealth derived from his. If he wanted to spend his profits on expensive comforts and conspicuous status symbols, there was no shame in that. It helped, actually. Like good advertisement, it let his clients know how good he really was. Wealth was its own justification. Wealth brought honor. Its value was—well, redundant. A master who shared a little venture capital with his retainers when he went out of town was not only increasing his potential joy—he was inviting them into it as well.

"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."

But here is what I want to know: when did we decide that the man going on a journey in the parable of the talents was *God*? I know Jesus told it as a parable of the kingdom, but how does that turn the little "m" master in the story into the capital "M" Master of the world? Haven't there always been a lot of masters applying for God's job, and some of them just plain...lousy?

Read the parable like someone living on a lake in Nicaragua—or one of the "little ones" who followed Jesus around—or even like someone camping out in Zucotti Park—and it can be hard to see the master as anything but one more tycoon sitting on a pile of money so high that he cannot see the bottom of it—which is why he has to hire people to keep it flowing up from wherever it comes from without troubling him with too many details. As long as they can double

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<sup>6</sup> Herzog, 150-168.

his money, they are welcome to make it any way they like. As long as they can give him back twice what he gave them, they may deduct their “expenses” to the full extent of the law—which has been generously amended so that people like the master can go on stimulating the economy for the good of all.

*Seriously?*

We are *seriously* supposed to believe that the first two servants in this parable are the praiseworthy ones, both in this world and the next—for making a wealthy man wealthier, for keeping an absentee landlord in business, for scoring a 100% rate of return for him in exchange for their own pieces of the pie—these are the guys who are *doing it right*, while the third one—the only one who buries the talent where it cannot do any more harm, the only one who tells the truth about the master (not behind his back but to his face), the only one who refuses to play the game any longer even if it means being banished from his master’s expensive “joy”—*he* is the one whose “overcaution” and “cowardice” have cost him “the opportunity for meaningful existence”?!

I can only imagine what William would say about that. Of course the master threw the third servant out! He could not have someone in his household exposing the truth “that he gathered where he hadn’t put anything, that he harvested and didn’t sow.” It was *past* time to show him the door.

As for that outer darkness where there is “wailing and gnashing of teeth”? I am pretty sure William would ask you if you really believe that darkness is God’s own hell, or if it is just the truth about where whistle-blowers really go once they have decided they cannot go on the way they have been anymore—that they would rather join the 99% in the dark than stay with the 1% of who burn through all the brightness without ever seeing those who foot the bill?

I just read an article called “Too Small to Fail” about Mosier, Oregon (population 430), the smallest town in the United States to join the Occupy Wall Street movement. Mosier does not have a stoplight. The only gas station closed years ago, but a handful of people are planning to set up a dozen tents where they can camp together and talk about things that matter to them. Their short list includes reducing the influence of corporations on local politics, supporting credit unions, and spending more money on health and education than on war.

“People have asked us if we were getting a permit,” Mosier resident Corie Lahr said in a recent interview. “We had to laugh because we don’t have sidewalks, let alone a city park where people could gather on city property for a protest.”<sup>7</sup> Once the camp is set up, members of the Occupy movement want to invite members of the Tea party to come for tea and round table discussion, hoping that the two groups can find places where their visions overlap.

The whole time I have been working on this sermon, I have been trying to imagine Jesus dropping by Mosier—coming up to the people sitting in their camp chairs in front of their tents, eating food out of plastic coolers off paper plates—all of them foregoing beds and showers and flat screen TVs for the time being so they can brainstorm how more people might share in the wealth of this nation they love. If they have any eighty -talents, they are sitting on them. There is no one selling anything in this camp; there is no one buying.

I have been trying to imagine Jesus coming up to one of them and saying, “I’ve come for my profit. What? No profit? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. Somebody take away the little bit they have here in Mosier and give it to those with ten times as much. For to all those

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<sup>7</sup> <http://occupywallst.org/article/too-small-fail-occupy-mosier/>, accessed 11/11/11.

who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

And you know what? I can't imagine it. *I can't imagine it at all.*

So maybe this is not a sermon about the parable of the talents at all. Maybe it is a sermon about how we read scripture—about why we are so reluctant to challenge established meanings, about what is at risk if we do, about what would happen if we stopped thinking of the truth of scripture as something already set down for good in an old, old book and re-conceived it as something fresh that happens every time we get together and let the sharp edges of our lives poke at scripture until it yields new and living truth—maybe even something that would upset the (little “m”) master--?

Wouldn't *that* be something?

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