

When Conscience is More Powerful Than Fear

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, Rector
November 12, 2005; 25th Sunday after Pentecost; Proper 28, Year A
Episcopal Revised Common Lectionary*

(Matthew 25:14-30) – "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves 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. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, '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.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, '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.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, '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.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

There is a traditional interpretation of this parable as a narrative version of a wisdom proverb. The proverb could go like this: If you use your gifts and talents that God has given you, they will multiply. If you do not use your gifts, you will lose them.

But I've always had trouble with that interpretation. Part of the interpretation relies on seeing the Master in the parable as an allegorical figure representing God. I've been bothered by the description of the Master -- an absent, harsh man, reaping where he doesn't sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. That does not sound like the God that Jesus Christ reveals

as loving and present Abba. Some have dismissed the description as the complaint of a wicked slave. But the actions of the Master sound pretty confirming of the slave's negative account. Give the money to the richest one; throw the unproductive slave into the outer darkness; give more to those with abundance, and take away the little they have from those who have nothing. That does not sound like the God of Jesus Christ.

During my sabbatical I had a chance to do a bit of study about parables like these. It's complicated scholarship to try to interpret parables. Debates abound about what parts of these

stories can be confidently assigned to the original voice of Jesus and what parts reflect the interpretations of the gospel writers or the Christian community. Often Matthew and Luke will tell the same story with interesting differences that tend to represent each writer's theology.

I'm intrigued by the attempt to get behind the written account, behind an earlier written source that the gospel author may be using, to try to interpret what Jesus may have said in the original context. Here's what one scholar brings to this parable.¹

These "slaves" are actually the retainers of a wealthy absentee landlord. According to the law of Hammurabi, they were expected to make a minimum profit of 100% on liquid assets. Beyond that, they could keep part, maybe even all of the excess income. One way they invested was to make loans to peasant farmers so that they could plant their crops with interest rates ranging to 60 percent and perhaps as high as 200 percent.

Jesus hearers would have been familiar with these characters. Some may have lost their lands through forced foreclosure when their crop was not sufficient to cover their loans to the retainer. The retainers' work was dirty work. And they were hated by the peasants.

These are very powerful businessmen. But when Jesus calls them slaves, he exposes their vulnerability and dependence upon their Master. Describing powerful men as slaves must have surprised Jesus' listeners. Maybe Jesus wanted them to re-think their attitudes toward these retainers. No one

¹William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

would have been surprised at the business acumen of the first two slaves. They doubled the Master's money. It was expected. But, what was surprising is the behavior of the third slave.

First, no one would talk back to an aristocratic elite the way that retainer did. Instead of fawning upon the powerful man, he calls him out publicly to his face: "I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." He speaks in the open the dirty business that is behind the wealth and power of this aristocrat. In some circles, he might be called a whistleblower. And though this retainer was afraid, he buried the money. He took the aristocrat's money out of circulation and hid it in the ground, where it could no longer do harm. He opted out of a corrupt and oppressive system. And he was right to be afraid. He is thrown into the outer darkness, away from the influence and protection of the aristocrat and other retainers, and into the world of the peasants where his skills are useless and their resentment toward his type of people is great. His is a desperate and vulnerable position.

Under this interpretation though, the third retainer is something of a hero. He has refused to participate in an abusive system, even though now he is facing the consequences. Maybe Jesus is encouraging a peasant community who would otherwise be hostile toward any retainer to give this one a break.

It makes me wonder. How desperate must this man have felt to take such a step. He must have come to the place where his conscience became more powerful

than his fear. Maybe he said to himself, "I just can't live this way any longer" and was willing to risk anything to get out. Maybe he could stand the hypocrisy no more and felt he had to expose the Master for what he is no matter what it costs.

I've known some people like that. I've known some people who risked much to escape a situation that was sucking the life out of them. I have a friend who had to give up every friend he had and every social pattern of his life in order to be free from an addiction to alcohol. I know someone who left a respected and wealthy spouse in order to escape a form of mental abuse that was crippling. I know someone who left a home town because it became too painful to hide his sexual orientation. I know someone who left a tenured professorship to start over as a novice in a new career when teaching was no longer fulfilling. Kathy's grandfather was a Baptist minister in a South Carolina textile mill-town. He sided with the workers in a labor dispute, and was kicked out of town. The best orthopaedic doctor in Jackson, Mississippi left his thriving and demanding private practice to work 9-to-5 in the V.A. hospital, where he feels he is giving back something to our soldiers and getting some balance back into his own life. I have a friend who was fired from a job for telling upper level management about the illegal activities of mid-level management. I know someone who took a heart-attack as a warning signal and changed jobs and life-style.

I also know people who feel trapped. I know someone who hates to go to work but feels he can't afford to quit. I know someone who silently overlooks her husband's infidelities because she's afraid he would divorce her. I know a minister who

yearns to preach more prophetically but fears the conflict that might ensue. I know someone who wants to marry someone of another race but can't face the family consequences. I know someone who silently covers for an incompetent boss every day. I know of a wife who couldn't report her husband's sexual abuse of their children. I know someone who works eighty hours a week for a company he's beginning not to believe in. I know someone who is working eighty hours a week for himself and is beginning not to believe in that either. I know someone who is afraid to report a drug dealer. I know someone who no longer believes the fundamentalist gospel he's preached all his life but would lose his church and every religious relationship he's ever known should he speak candidly.



So Jesus tells us a story of someone who opted out of participating in a destructive system at great cost to himself. What would he have us do about that?

It seems Jesus offers one message to encourage acts of integrity, justice, and public consciousness raising, even when they are costly. There is something heroic about this slave who stands up to his Master and thus stops a small part of the cycle of oppression. We can ask ourselves, how are we trapped into cooperating with systems or relationships that are sucking the life out of us? How should we opt out of such entrapments, burying our participation instead of using our talents wrongly?

But more than that. It seems to me that Jesus is telling the community of his listeners to open their hearts with compassion and to give some support to those people who take such risks. Some people are able to leave a destructive situation when they believe that they have even just a little backup or understanding out there somewhere. We can be the community that takes the fallen

retainer out of the outer darkness he been thrown into and befriends him.

Even if that retainer seems to have made a mess of his life thus far. Even if he was someone we pointed toward as one of the "bad guys." Now that he's stood up to the oppression that also trapped him, he needs our friendship.

Anybody out there stuck in a cycle of destruction? Sure. Anybody out there escaping and paying for it? You bet. We can help. How can we help?