



Harvest Time

Christians of wealth engaging with money as a doorway to spiritual transformation.

The Terrible Parable of the Talents

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Not long ago I attended a conference of African church leaders on the topic of “Gospel Economics.” It opened with a lively debate on the question of whether it was sinful for a Christian to make a profit in business or to accumulate wealth.

On one side were the progressives who argued that Christians should indeed seize the opportunity to participate in the marketplace as a way of generating the skills and resources necessary to bring prosperity to a struggling continent. They spoke from the opening chapters of Genesis. We are co-creators with God, they said; we can work with God to bring order out of chaos; we can be fruitful; we can bring food, clean water, health care and education to our communities; we can leave a legacy to our children so that they, too, may live fruitful lives.

On the other side were the conservatives who cited the traditions of the elders and the clear injunctions of scripture. Many of their grandparents, born in villages and living as subsistence farmers, had been deeply suspicious of the cash economy. We are creatures, they said; God provides for us; what we are given today, we share; we take no thought for tomorrow. Abundance comes from God, not cash. Lending money at interest is forbidden by scripture. We do not wish to enrich ourselves at the expense of others.

Never in a lifetime of American churchgoing had I heard this conversation. Often I am struck by how differently African Christians hear the scriptures, and especially the parable of Jesus. In particular the many images of peasant life, of sowing and harvesting, strike them, not as metaphorical images, but as the stuff of life or death. Surely this is how Jesus’ original audience heard them.

The parables of Jesus can be bewildering. If we try to capture their meanings in moral lessons, they elude us. If we look to them for clear guidance, we may become confused. They speak to us at deep levels, sometimes deeper than words, and they may speak to us differently at different times and in different circumstances.

Take, for example, the Parable of the Talents. At times the parable has seemed to me to be God’s gift to parish clergy. It comes around in the lectionary just at the time when parishes are trying to raise money. This year, here at the Cathedral, we are undertaking not only our annual pledge drive, but an ambitious capital funds campaign. In this context, a particular meaning for this parable fairly leaps off the page:

Christ, like the landlord of the parable, has left us, his servants, his stewards, in charge of the kingdom, and has given us gifts – time, talents, treasure – for which we are responsible, and for which we must ultimately give an account. Who would not want to hear on that day what the first two servants heard, “Well done, good and faithful servants! Enter into the joy of your master!” Let us then live as they did, with the freedom to put our talents and treasure to use in God’s service, even daring to risk them openly and generously for the sake of generating an increase of God’s reign here on earth. Let us not live with the fear that paralyzed the third, unprofitable slave. Let us, instead, joyfully open our checkbooks ... and so on.

Not that this message is wrong. In fact, I can testify that this account of Christian stewardship has served, not only the financial success of churches, but also for much of the healing, liberation and spiritual growth I have experienced in my own life. It has helped me to avoid the lie, on the one hand, that my money is my own to do with as I please, with no sense of accountability. And it has helped me, on the other hand, to release my fearful grip and to give freely. In this I feel the image of God grow stronger in me, because it is the nature of God to give and give freely.

But today I hear the parable with different ears – not only the ears of my African friends, but the ears of the homeless and unemployed people among those camping at Occupy Boston. I also shudder when I hear this parable through the ears of many members of this congregation who are only a paycheck or two or less away from being on the streets themselves; whose own employment, if they have it, is by no means secure; and who must hear me urge them to make a five year pledge of sacrificial giving to help renovate a church building.

When I hear the parable through these ears, its shadow side emerges. Who is this absentee landlord; how has he come to own this land and these slaves; where is he from and where does he go off to? Is the third slave not right that the landlord ‘reaps where he did not sow and gathers where he did not scatter seed,’ which is to say, that he lives outside the natural order and the common lot of humanity; enriching himself without the sweat of this brow, without producing a single tangible product or rendering a single real service – a paragon, we might say today, of the 1%!

Do the actions of this landlord suggest to us the kingdom of God, or do they rather suggest the kingdom of this world where ‘to all those who have, more will be given...; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away’ – that is, where the rich grow richer and the poor grow poorer.

And see how harshly he condemns the third slave as ‘wicked and lazy’ who has done nothing worse than to keep safe the treasure entrusted to him – a responsibility he never asked for. Can this landlord really be for us a figure of the God we know in Christ? Furthermore, the fate of the slave, to be cast into the outer darkness, is not this the fate of Jesus himself at the hands of the powers that be, to be cast out of the city and nailed to a cross? Would not Jesus’ humble followers in the early church – many slaves themselves – have seen themselves in this third servant?

What, then, can the parable mean? What is its message for us today? I cannot say. The parable leaves me bewildered. Perhaps it is meant to do so. Perhaps the Holy Spirit intends to uproot me from my assumptions and to drive me into the wilderness. This, too, I cannot say.

I can venture this, out of my wrestling with this parable and my own experiences of dealing with money.

I find money to be a terrible thing, in the literal sense. Its power strikes terror in me. Money has the power to do great good, to enrich the joys of life, to provide the means in this world for human flourishing. Money has the power also to so distort the image of God within us that we become like monsters to one another.

Jesus said, where your treasure is, there is your heart, also. I understand that to mean that my money flows according to my heart’s desire. I believe that money can come within the providence of God and move in the world as an instrument of God’s justice and love when it follows the prayer of a converted heart.

Our hope, then, for an economy here on earth that serves the common good of all creation, our only hope, lies in our conversion, the turning and opening of our hearts to the love of God.

Pray, then, this terrible parable. Pray the bewilderment it leads us into. Pray its light; pray its shadow. Pray God’s providence and the abundance of God’s Reign. And pray your money. Amen.

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