

Towering Trees and "Talented" Slaves

The parables of Jesus have been spiritualized
and their subversive content tamed.
Can we bring them back to earth?

by Ched Myers and Eric DeBode

THE PARABLES OF JESUS IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS represent the very oldest traditions in the New Testament. Despite this (or perhaps because of it), our churches often handle these stories timidly, if they handle them at all. Perhaps we intuit that there is something so wild and subversive about these tales that they are better kept safely at the margins of our consciousness.

Many Christians simply ignore the parables, believing that Jesus' teachings were eclipsed by later theological developments: either by his work on the cross (fundamentalists), or by Pauline doctrine (mainstream Protestants), or by the Church and its magisterium (Catholics), or by the Enlightenment (liberals). The parables are apprehended at most as quaint and poetic, but hardly relevant or substantive for Christian discipleship.

Most churches that do focus attention on Gospel parables spiritualize them relentlessly. Typically, the parables are preached as "earthly stories with heavenly meanings." Thus stories about landless peasants and rich landowners, or lords and slaves, or lepers and lawyers are lifted out of their social and historical context and reshaped into theological or moralistic fables bereft of any political or economic edge or consequence.

When the sociocultural context indigenous to the story is ignored or suppressed, however, we inevitably recontextualize the story in terms of our own unconscious political assumptions. Our imposed schema often defy the coherence of the text itself.

More importantly, though, this interpretive strategy functions to domesticate the parable to conform with our status quo. Thus stories meant to challenge our preconceptions are used to legitimate them. In this way, we disarm the some of the Gospels' most powerful rhetorical weapons--weapons whose very intent is to rescue believers from domestication by that same status quo.

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Even more problematic than our sentimentalizing of kingdom parables is the way we misread Jesus' parables about the world, reading them as if they were kingdom parables--with disastrous consequences. The most notorious case is the infamous parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30).

This has been for many an unsettling story. It seems to promote ruthless business practices (v. 20), usury (v. 27), and the cynical view that the rich will only get richer while the poor become destitute (v.29). Moreover, if we assume, as does the traditional reading, that the master is a figure for God, it is a severe portrait indeed: an absentee lord (v. 15) who cares only about profit maximization (v. 21), this character is hardhearted (v. 24) and ruthless (v. 30).

Despite these concerns, this story still routinely occasions countless homilies (usually on stewardship Sunday) about how we Christians should gainfully employ our "talents" for God-- despite the fact that "talent" in the Gospel text has nothing to do with our individual gifts and everything to do with economics. Might it be that we have imposed upon the parable our capitalist presumptions about the glories of a system that rewards "venture capital," and thus read the story exactly backwards?

Our first clue lies in the parable that immediately precedes the story of the talents. A specifically kingdom teaching, the story of the bridesmaids reiterates the traditional gospel exhortation to "stay awake" so as not to be caught unawares by the "moment of truth" (Matt. 25:1-13). This story prefigures the drama in the Garden of Gethsemane, in which the disciples are urged to remain vigilant for when the time comes to confront injustice.

What follows is a story about a very rich master--but there is no indication that this is a kingdom parable (25:14). We have been warned to be alert!

The original audience of this story would not have had to allegorize the parable to make sense of it. Its portrait of a great household--the closest thing in antiquity to the modern corporation--was all too recognizable. The powerful patriarch would often be away on economic or political business. His affairs would be handled by slaves, who in Roman society often rose to prominent positions in the household hierarchy as "stewards" (25:15).

But the sums entrusted here border on hyperbole. Scott writes: "A talent was one of the largest values of money in the Hellenistic world. A silver coinage, it weighed between fifty-seven and seventy-four pounds. One talent was equal to 6,000 denarii." Since one denarius was an average subsistence wage for a day's labor, one talent was worth more than fifteen years wages. In the modern era, we might roughly translate the assets made available for investment at about 2.5 million dollars. These are elite financial dealings indeed!

The first two slaves double their master's investment (25:16-17). Though lauded by modern interpreters, this feat would have elicited disgust from the first-century audience. In his article "A Peasant Reading of the Parable of the Talents," Richard Rohrbaugh notes that in antiquity the highest legal interest rate was about 12 percent; anything higher was considered rapacious. This is the first of many hints that the operations of this household are something less than exemplary.

Bruce Malina in *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* has shown that in traditional Mediterranean society, the ideal was stability, not self-advancement. Anyone trying to accumulate inordinate wealth imperiled the equilibrium of society and was thus understood to be dishonorable. Greed was widely believed to characterize the rich, who extorted and defrauded other members of the community through lucrative trading, tax collecting, and lending money at interest. In fact, usury was understood in antiquity to be responsible for the destructive cycle of indebtedness and poverty, while profiting from commodity trading was explicitly condemned by no less a sage than Aristotle.

The biblically literate, moreover, would recall the warning against stored surplus in Exodus 16:16-20, the prohibition against usury and profiteering off the poor in Leviticus 25:36ff, or Isaiah's condemnation of those who "join house to house and field to field" in their real-estate dealings (Isa. 5:8). Yet Herzog thinks it is precisely such unscrupulous business dealings that are implied by each slave's doubling his master's investment. Large landowners made loans to peasant small holders based on speculations of future crop production. With high interest rates and vulnerability to lean years and famine, farmers often were unable to make their payments, and faced foreclosure. After gaining control of the land, the new owner could continue to make a killing by hiring laborers to farm cash crops.

It is a process of economic exploitation and wealth accumulation that is still all too characteristic of our own global economy. In the parable, the master's slaves do this highly profitable dirty work well.

We, of course, undaunted by this historical context and blissfully interpreting the parable through capitalist lenses, have nothing but praise for these "good stewards." As Rohrbaugh puts it, "commentators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have genuinely reveled in the parable's seeming exhortation to venturesome investment and diligent labor." We then turn to castigate the third slave who, cautious and "unproductive," represents an object lesson of entrepreneurial failure (25:18). But if the manner of profiteering portrayed in the story would have been understood by the original audience as rapacious, is it not possible that this noncooperating third slave might in fact be the hero of this parable?

When the master returns to settle accounts we find identical phrasing in his commendations of the first two financiers (25:21,23): "Well done, good and trustworthy slave--enter into the joy of your master." We are used to reading this allegorically as connoting entry into heavenly bliss. But at the plain level of the parable it serves not only as a promotion ("I will put you in charge of many things"); it is also a reminder that these handlers are still slaves, and that it is the master's joy in which they are participating! We might say that these slaves are more captive than ever to the world controlled by their lord.

Like a good three-part joke, we now come to the punch line: The third slave is about to explain his (in)action (25:24-25). That he buried the money in the ground seems strange at first glance. But considering that many in Jesus' audience were farmers, there may be some wry peasant humor here. Those who work the land know that all true wealth comes from God, the source of rain, sunshine, seed, and soil. But this silver talent, when "sown," produced no fruit!

Here is the clash between two economic worldviews: the traditional agrarian notion of "use-value" and the elite's currency-based system of "exchange-value." Money cannot grow the natural way like seed, only unnaturally, through usury and swindling. Is this symbolic act of "planting" the talent a case of prophetic tricksterism to reveal that money is not fertile?

The third slave now begins to speak truth to power. "I knew you were a harsh man" (the Greek is *skleros*, a word associated with old Pharaoh's disease of hardheartedness). "You reap where you did not sow, and gather where you did not scatter seed" (25:24).

With these words the third slave becomes what Herzog calls a "whistle-blower," having unmasked the fact that the master's wealth is derived entirely from the toil of others. He profits from the backbreaking labor of those who work the land. Unwilling to participate in this exploitation, this third slave took the money out of circulation, where it could no longer be used to dispossess another family farmer.

This courageous dissident embodies the moral of the bridesmaids parable. He has awakened to the rules of the master's world. His repudiation of it is simple and curt: "Here, take back what is yours" (25:25). But he admits that through it all "I was afraid." For good reason--he is about to meet the prophet's fate.

It is instructive that the master does not refute the whistle-blower's analysis of his world. He simply castigates him as "evil and lazy" (the favorite slur of the rich toward those who don't play the game), and wonders rhetorically why the slave didn't at least seek market-rate return. The master is not interested in what is his own--he appreciates only appreciation. He then decides to make an example of the third slave, dispossessing him and giving the single talent to his obedient colleague, in order to illustrate the way the real world works: "For to those who have, more will be given--but for those who have not, even what they have will be taken away" (25:28-29).

This parable reads much more coherently as a cautionary tale about the world controlled by great householders (this is even clearer in Luke's version of the story, Luke 19:11-27). Jesus may even have been spinning a thinly-veiled autobiographical tale here--for he, too, will shortly stand before the powers, speak the truth, and take the consequences. To read in it a divine endorsement of mercenary economics and the inevitable polarization of wealth is to miss the point completely--and to perpetuate both dysfunctional theology and complicit economics in our churches.

The consequence of the third slave's noncooperation is banishment to the "outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30). We have presumed this to be "hell," and so perhaps it is--that is, the hell on earth experienced by those rejected by the dominant culture: in the shadows where the light of the royal courts never shine, on the mean streets outside the great households, the dwelling place of the outcast poor like Lazarus (Luke 16:19-21). But the story that immediately follows this tragic conclusion--the famous last-judgment parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46) may illuminate the nature of the dissident slave's exile.

This singular judgment story in the Gospels suggests that we meet Christ mysteriously by feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned (Matt. 25:25-40). In other words, we meet Christ in places of pain and marginality; the "outer darkness." The whistle-blower's punishment kicks him out of the rich man's system, but brings him closer to the

true Lord, who dwells with the poor and oppressed.

We have for too long ignored or trivialized parables as arcane, pedantic, or platitudinous, ever hoping to keep aright the world they mean to turn upside down. But our two examples show that Jesus used these "folksy" stories to expose the most entrenched arrangements of power and privilege, whether Roman militarism or Judean elitism. He challenged the "tall trees" of imperial domination with his "mustard seed" movement of Jubilee justice. And he called for renewed resistance to usurious "business as usual" in Israel, a costly vocation of truth and consequences.

Only by bringing the parables back down to earth can we encounter their power both to unmask the "real world" in its cruelty and presumption, and to proclaim the radical hope of God's sovereignty, buried like a seed in the hard soil of our history.