

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

November 19, 2023

The Problem with Parables

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote, "How you hear a parable has a lot to do with where you are hearing it from."¹ This is not a new thought; the philosopher Hans Gadamer, makes a similar point in his seminal work, "Truth and Method." In that work Gadamer explores the intersecting point between creator and consumer. An artist has a vast "horizon of meaning" that influences the work they are creating. The consumer of that art also has a vast "horizon of meaning" that influences how they interact with that art. Either way you put it; we bring a lot of ourselves to scripture when we read it.

This reality likely explains why traditional interpretations of certain parables often persist, even when they can prove to be somewhat problematic. I have to be honest with you, I do not like this parable. Sure, from like a 20,000 foot view it is a great teaching on how God wants us to use the gifts that we have been given. But when you bore down into the details of this parable, it says some things about God that I'm not entirely comfortable with.

The popularity of the traditional interpretation of this parable can easily be explained by where most people today are at when they hear it. We bring our own understanding of investment and economy to this parable. We bring our own understanding of money and employment to it as well. But we are doing all of that from our current context and reality. Which I'm not sure is how the original audience would have heard it.

So, let's provide some context to this parable. We can't know perfectly how the original audience would have heard this parable, but we can explore the context of the people who heard it and imagine how that might have shaped what they heard. Let's begin with talents. A single talent was worth roughly the equivalent of 6000 denarii. One denarius is a single day's wage. So, one

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. "The Parable of the Fearful investor." A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 13, 2011

talent represents somewhere in the neighborhood of 16 years' worth of wages. A talent itself was typically gold or silver and could weigh anywhere from 70 to 130 pounds. We are talking about vast sums of money in this parable. The sort of wealth that most people in the Roman Empire could only dream of.

Now, how do you imagine the wealthiest people of the time made their fortunes? Mostly the same way the wealthy today do...they inherited it. But then what do they do with that inherited wealth? Typically, they would loan money to farmers and tradespeople, often at exorbitant interest rates. This was a big enough and common enough issue that it even gets addresses in the Torah; Exodus 22:25-27 has God telling the Israelites, "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. If you take your neighbor's cloak as guarantee, you shall restore it before the sun goes down, for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as a cover. In what else shall that person sleep? And when your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate." Unfortunately, there is quite a lot of evidence to suggest that this portion of the Torah has rarely been followed or even emphasized.

So, the wealthy elites of the time would loan money at high rates and when their debtors couldn't pay (maybe due to drought or something wildly outside their control), they would take the farm or vineyard or fishing boat or woodworking shop or whatever. In this manner those who have much get more and those who have little lose what little they have. The result was often people ending up being day laborers on the ancestral land that they lost to their creditors.

How would someone who lives in this context hear the parable Jesus shared in our Gospel text today? Rather than 21st century American ears, how would a poor and exploited day laborer in 1st century Palestine hear this? Perhaps someone who watched their parents lose the family farm to a wealthy foreigner. Or someone who had been taken advantage of when they were struggling? How would they hear verse 29 in particular: "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."

When we take all of this context into account, we find an exceedingly wealthy master who entrusts vast sums of money to three high-ranking slaves. Two of these slaves double the master's money. How? They "traded" with it. They invested the money...they loaned it out! The third slave chooses a different

path. He chooses not to participate in the systems that would result in doubling his master's money (likely at the expense of the poor). Instead, he says to his master, "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."² Perhaps that becomes a brave statement when we consider this context; one meant to call out an exploitative master and system.

Is this parable meant to be heard prescriptively? Meaning its goal is to teach its hearers how to act. Or is this parable meant to be read descriptively? Meaning it is describing how the world works currently. Verse 29 in particular, sounds more descriptive than prescriptive to me. It is generally true in my experience that it is easy for the wealthy to get wealthier and just as easy for the poor to lose everything and be cast out into darkness by the powerful.

Much like my sermon from a few weeks ago titled, "[The Trouble with Allegory](#)," I don't want to offer a definitive answer for solving the problem of this parable. The traditional interpretation is a fine one...as long as you keep that 20,000-foot view of it. We should wrestle with how we use the various gifts God gives us to further the mission of Christ. But it is also right and good for us to go deeper, look closer, and ask difficult questions of the text. Wrestling with Scripture is an important part of following the Way of Christ. Asking questions means we're taking it seriously too!

The alternative interpretation I'm offering today, while it has its own issues, leads to some very interesting questions for us to consider. Questions concerning our complicity in exploitative systems. Questions about what we do with our resources and how willing we are to take advantage of others. It also raises questions about our relationship with authority. Are we willing to stand up to exploitative and entrenched systems? Even when we're afraid? Even at great personal cost?

If you don't think much of this alternative interpretation, that's okay. But I hope you consider some of the questions this interpretation raises. And whether you view our text today as a prescriptive parable that powerfully teaches about stewardship of God's gifts, or you view it as a descriptive parable about our broken and exploitative economic systems; there is much to wrestle with! Please, take Scripture seriously, take God seriously! Wrestle with both! After

² Matthew 25:24b-25 (NRSVUE)

all, God blessed Jacob at the Jabbok³ by changing his name to Israel, which means “wrestles with God.” I believe God has blessed us with the gifts we need to wrestle just as well. Amen.

³ Genesis 32:25-30