

“Slave to the System” Judges 4:1-7; Matthew 25:14-30

Rev. Michele Ward

November 15, 2020; The 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD

This parable hits right where it hurts, doesn't it? I bet you're thinking, why yes, it does--it brings up all sorts of resistance inside of me, and I don't understand why you picked such an awful gospel reading this morning. In fact, you might be wondering why in the world Jesus would tell a story like this to his students and listeners, why Matthew would bother to write it down at all. A parable that reinforces God as a wrathful slave-owning master and human beings as pieces of property?

The fact of the matter is that I picked this Gospel text this morning because I wanted to wrestle with it. I wanted to get stuck in it. I wanted to invite you to struggle with this parable, too. Because this parable isn't about what most of us have thought. It is not about some wrathful God manipulating and controlling humanity. Most biblical commentaries argue that God is the master and God's people are the slaves, but that does not match up with the historical context of the enslaved population in the Roman Empire, nor with the Jesus community.

So, we need to deal with the language first. The Greek word for 'slave' in the Gospel of Matthew, δούλος [*doulos*] is much more accurate than the sugarcoated version of the word 'servant,' 'worker,' or 'helper' that some English translations of the Bible use as substitutes. The word slave is too loaded, too negative. But the word choice matters, particularly with the context. Scholar Mary Ann Beavis points out that the Roman Empire had “a ratio of one in five enslaved people.”¹ Jesus was born during the rule of Caesar Augustus, and during his reign enslaved people were “largely drawn from war captives.” After Caesar Augustus, other types of enslavement increased, such as “kidnapping, debt enslavement, ‘self-sale’ [forced reproduction], and [the intake of abandoned infants].”²

Jesus told this parable to a community where 20% of the population was enslaved and the Roman Empire's tactics of enslavement were consistently violent. For these reasons alone, Jesus would not tell a parable reinforcing the master/slave relationship. This is typically the argument of biblical scholars because they put God into the role of the property owner and master. They put Jesus followers into the role of enslaved people and forced laborers. It is much more likely that the original listeners felt sympathy for the third person in the parable--the person who hid the money instead of investing it. William Herzog argues that the third person “said what the hearers had always wanted to say and right to the master's face!”

¹ Mary Ann Beavis.

² Beavis.

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We all know why we hold our tongues in the face of power. We all know, to a variety of degrees, how risky it can be to tell the ugly truth to people hungry to misuse their power and their money. None of us need be surprised, then, that the property owner punishes the enslaved person for speaking boldly and disobeying their commands. This person had the boldness to say, “You reap where you did not sow, you gather where you did not scatter seed.” The third person directly says that the property owner is stealing the resources of others and does so without apology. While this may seem obvious, the third person says whatever everyone else is already thinking to the property owner when he comes to collect. He tells him, “You are unjust. You are harsh. You scare people. You take from others what they work for every day.”

In John 15:19, Jesus tells us that “if [we] belong to the world [that is, the hierarchical order and patterns of life, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world--therefore it hates you.” Yikes. John’s words come to pass in this parable in the Gospel of Matthew. This truth speaker disobeys the hierarchy. None of us need to be surprised, again, that the third person is hated by the property owner who expects to make a profit out of their labor and skills. They are not much different than Jesus himself, whose fate will lead him to torture and execution, whose crime against the system was being faithful to God’s hierarchy rather than the empire’s hierarchy. God’s hierarchy favors the oppressed and the enslaved rather than the land owners and the Roman citizens. God’s hierarchy favors the exploited rather than the exploiters.

Herzog, the scholar I mentioned earlier, claims that the third enslaved person “Reveals what has been covered beneath the public rhetoric of praise and promise ... he describes the master for what he is and acknowledges that he will pay a price, but he has decided to accept the cost rather than continue to pursue his exploitive path.”³ Jesus says at the beginning of the parable, “It is like this.” And, it is. It is like this, even today. God dwells in the ones who take risks, who tell the truth, who break the cycles of domination and exploitation. God dwells in the ones who hope and expect that others will join them in their holy organizing for the people society undervalues. God dwells in the ones who take the risk to do the impossible task.

But what of the first two people in the story, the ones who obey the property owner and invest the money? What of their choice to participate in the cycle of domination and exploitation? They certainly do benefit on the surface

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level in this parable. They both receive praise from the property owner. He calls them good and trustworthy. He tells them that because they have been faithful with a few things, that he will give them more responsibility. And, because of their goodness, honesty, and faithfulness, they can “enter the joy of their master.” Well, technically, he did not give them anything. They are enslaved. He commands them to invest this money and give him the profits back whenever he decides to come back and check on them. They can pretend that they have the freedom to do whatever they want with the money, but in reality, whatever they produce or invest will go straight back to the property owner when he comes calling.

But Jesus does not call them out for remaining obedient to the property owner. Jesus does not praise them, either. They have complicated reasons, most likely, for coloring inside the lines. They have learned how to not only survive, but to thrive, in the property owner’s system of exploitation and oppression. And, I must add, because of the few alternatives for enslaved people in the Roman Empire, their accumulated responsibility as enslaved people with more status would be seen as a benefit, as an asset. Jesus does not rationalize or justify their choices. Jesus does not make them accountable for the very systems that exploit them, either. He simply presents the parable to us, the listeners, to discern and interpret.

This is not a gift from a friendly hedge fund that wants to support a start up. This is actually an investment of 15 years of wages, given what biblical scholars know about earnings during the reign of Caesar Augustus.⁴ 15 years of wages is an unjust amount to leave in the hands of enslaved people and walk away. It’s hyperbolic, of course, because no property owner would give 15 years of wages away at once and say, “I’ll be back later when you’re done building my wealth.” The expectation of the property owner is that the money will grow and he can come back whenever he pleases to request the return on his investment. The other expectation here is that the property owner gives his earnings--earnings that he has because of previous unjust practices, given the fact that he can give so much at once, personal wealth in place because of other people he has exploited in the past. And now, he gives it to three more people he is actively exploiting, in the hopes that they will generate even more wealth for him. The system continues, unabated, with the exception of the third person who speaks up and receives punishment.

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The first two people in the parable choose to uphold the very system that oppresses them. Perhaps they uphold the system because the risk is too high--they were given more wealth to build, after all, than the third person. Perhaps others depend on them. Perhaps you relate to them. Do we occasionally benefit from oppressive and exploitative systems, even those experiencing oppression and exploitation? Yes, in part. We selfishly continue to operate in systems that hurt others because of the benefit to ourselves. We may have been led to believe that they are inherently good, build on moral values of order and justice. We may even believe that they are the only or best options out there for ordering our life together. Most of the time, structural change like this parable talks about is a highly complex mixture of moral decision making. We must be uncomfortable with our participation, not resigned to it. And, we are not the only ones to hold accountable for injustice's continuation.

Unless we relate more to the property owner, to the master, than the enslaved people laboring on their behalf. Unless we relate more to the types of people in this day and age who look at the human beings around us as ways to increase our wealth. Perhaps we relate to the types of business owners and leaders who are paternalistic in their generosity, who believe that we are doing other people favors by inviting them into powerful roles--like the enslaved people in this parable--that will give them some authority over others that they can, in turn, exploit. The types of people who feel offended when someone calls out that we benefit from exploiting others and hoarding resources. The types of people whom others protect because we are, “harsh” or we “scare” others. The types of people who tell stories of discovery and ownership about land that we stole.

I want to share a story about the ways I relate more to the property owner this morning. When I was in middle school, I did a family genealogy project on my dad's side of the family. My paternal grandmother had always talked about her family moving out west to California from Virginia during the 1880s, but I never knew why. That, until she showed me a copy of a biography called *And Then We Came to California* by Sarah Summers Clarke, her grandmother, my great-great grandmother. I read this biography for my family genealogy project, not knowing what I would discover inside those yellow pages. I learned that my family had owned a small plantation called Level Green Farm in what is now Centreville, Virginia, in Fairfax County. My family owned people. We were the masters. Level Green Farm became a Confederate Hospital during the Civil War, and historians dug up the remains of Confederate soldiers there up into the 1990s. My great-great grandfather was a

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courier in the Confederate Army named William Clarke. Sarah and William met while he was delivering messages to the hospital.

My family moved out west to homestead on land stolen from the native people of the Central Valley due to losing their plantation’s wealth building foundation: enslaved people. After Emancipation, the only enslaved person who stayed was my great-great grandmother’s housekeeper and nanny, who stayed back to take care of her mother in her old age and take care of Level Green Farm.

Learning this story, this parable of my family heritage matters. My family’s wealth from generations of colonizing in Virginia gave them the status and wealth to move out west and build a new empire for themselves of industry and businesses. Their privilege as white landowners gave them access to support and wealth. It is no accident or divine right that things have gone the way they have for my family. I cannot be so fragile as a white person that I cannot tell this story with honesty. Telling the truth and living differently because of it is the key to unlocking my salvation, our salvation.

The reality is that the people who uphold the systems are the ones who continue to benefit from them, who accumulate wealth, who have security. As a white woman I have more access to power because of the color of my skin. I still experience oppression because of my gender, but I have to watch myself. I must ask myself how I am still serving the patriarchy rather than dismantling it. As a bisexual person married to a cisgender heterosexual man, I can easily pass as a straight person. I must ask myself how I am upholding anti-queer and anti-trans systems and how I am benefiting from them. I spent most of my 20s making less than \$40,000 a year and had health insurance only because of the Affordable Care Act. My seminary and some of the churches I served previously did not provide me with health insurance because I was not full time and I was not ordained yet. I know what it is like to live paycheck to paycheck and have limited access to a living wage and healthcare. Now I must ask myself how I advocate for capitalism and its benefits when I know its oppression. The reality I just outlined here is complex. I walk the line between multiple realities every day. And, if I was aware of each of these realities all of the time, I might self combust. But if I ignore them, I am fully complicit and I am just as responsible as the property owner in this parable. I own that, at times, I uphold the very systems that despise me while at the same time I advocate for their dismantling or reform. And I must acknowledge that I receive more rewards when I uphold these systems.

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The values of the Roman Empire’s system defines what the rewards are for enslaved people, too. In this parable, the reward is a promotion within the hierarchy that already exists. The power and the money continues to belong to the property owner although the enslaved people do all of the work. The property owner punishes the third person who tries to change the system and he rapidly loses his power because he is a risk to the system’s success. This parable leaves the third person alone to figure out what is next. Neither of his fellow slaves join him in his struggle against the empire’s unethical exploitation of human bodies and their skills. This still happens today. Think of a coworker who took the fall for your team while you remained silent. Think of a classmate bullied at school while you laughed uncomfortably. Think of a family member making a microaggression against someone you love that you do not call out.

Our friend Herzog refers to what the third person does as taking the money “out of circulation.”⁵ I want to challenge you to think about this as I wrap up this morning. If you are feeling trapped in a system or a culture that has chosen you rather than you choosing it, there are creative ways to engage. Ask yourself--in what ways can you be in deeper solidarity with the people who disrupt the system’s hierarchy? How can you reflect on your personal choices and the ways you can “take out of circulation” your resources and reinvest them differently? None of us are in the same position by a long shot in this parable. The specifics of race, gender, sexuality, and ability exist in order to assist us to honestly think about whom we relate to the most in this parable and in our lives. Jesus told parables to reveal God’s imagination for a different way--for the Gospel, good news way. So, here is your task--find yourself in this complex system. What will you do when you are put in positions like the ones I mentioned in ordinary ways? Like the master says in this parable, “For the one who is faithful in small things, more will be given to them.” When God invites us to disrupt evil, no matter how inconsequential or extensive it may be, how will you respond? Will you passively accept your status? Or will you navigate the complexity of it all with discernment, and faithfulness, practicing kindness with ourselves and others, pushing one another to confront our role in the systems we uphold?

⁵ Herzog