



breadfortheworld
HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.

November 13, 2011: Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time ***Walter Wink***

RCL: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

LM: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; Psalm 128:1-2,3, 4-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6;
Matthew 25:14-30 or 25:14-15, 19-21

[Note: Walter Wink's reflection for this week focuses exclusively on the Gospel passage]

In modern times the parable of the Talents has been understood to mean earning power. Matthew may have understood it as natural abilities (v. 15); others, as divine gifts. How might Jesus have intended it?

These readings all assume that God is the master and we are the servants. But then a wonderful thing happened in a maximum security prison in New York State, where biblical scholar Robert T. Fortna had taken a class of undergraduates. The parable of the Talents was the subject of the study that night. What follows is a condensed reconstruction of that conversation:

FORTNA: Our agenda is the parable of the Talents. I suggest we try to discover what Jesus' original story was and what it means.

JOEY: Well, we all know that, it's about our talents God gave us, how we should use them.

FORTNA: Are you sure?

SEVERAL INMATES: Of course. Hell yes. What else could it mean?

FORTNA: But why does Jesus tell this long and complicated story just to say that?

INMATES: You tell us, Prof; that's your thing. *[Laughter, no derisive]*

FORTNA: Well, I'm not sure I know. *[Murmuring]*

RED: Joey told you what it means. Ain't he right?

FORTNA: I don't think so.

INMATES: Then why does it talk about talents?



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A STUDENT [*to the teacher's relief*]: It can't be about talents, because in the story that word means a lot of money and doesn't have anything to do with what we call talent.

RED: Well, look at the story. It says, "Each according to his ability." Don't that mean talent?

STUDENT [*taken aback*]: Well, maybe...

JOEY: What does she mean, "maybe"? Whatcha teaching these kids, Prof?

FORTNA: I try to get them to look at the text... and Red got us started.

JOEY: Yeah, like I said, the story means we should use our talents what God gave us; some does better at that than some others. [*Looking around with a grin*]

SMITTY: Hey, Joey; what use you got for talents? You in here for life, man. [*Laughter, easy and affectionate from the inmates, nervous from the visitors*]

FORTNA [*trying hard*]: We tend to assume that the rich man who went away stands for God. Can we be sure of that?

INMATES: It's obvious. All these stories are about God.

FORTNA: Look, let's study the story just the way it's told. What do you think of the three slaves?

SMITTY: Two of them is smart, one kinda slow.

FORTNA: So if you were the man who buried the money, you'd punish him too?

RED: Of course the rich dude gonna punish him; he was this "unprofitable servant."

SMITTY: Yeah, my Bible say he was worthless.

FORTNA: Do you agree?

ALL: Why not?

JOEY: Prof, this is gettin' us nowhere. We all understand this story; let's talk 'bout somethin' useful.



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FORTNA [*a little desperately, grasping at a straw*]: Wait a minute, Joey. Which of those three guys in the story do you like the best?

SMITTY [*after a pause, and with a little smile*]: Why, Prof, I like that third guy.

FORTNA: Okay, go with that. How do you feel about this boss who gave you all this money to invest for him?

SMITTY [*pausing*]: Why that son of a bitch! He tryin' to use me to make his money for him. And I get the rap in the end if I lose it.

FORTNA: So is he God?

JOEY: Of course not. Who said that anyway? [*Laughter*]

Joey, with many of his fellow inmates, is one of the kind of people Jesus mostly addressed in his teaching—disenfranchised, rejected, oppressed. So perhaps his intuition, once the religious habits of his Biblicist upbringing fell away, gives us a clue to this parable's meaning.

At roughly the same time that Fortna's class discovered new insight in this parable, Richard Rohrbaugh, Bruce Malina, Dom Crosson, and, shortly thereafter, William Herzog, were developing a similar rereading of this parable. What Smitty intuited from his social location these scholars have now independently demonstrated exegetically. The master is a rapacious aristocrat who really is the kind of man the third slave says he is. The servants know they must make a 100 percent profit; everything after that they can keep. They are the ones, then, who do the master's dirty work, exploiting others for profit, largely through loans with exorbitant interest. The master is happy to let them skim "honest graft" as he rewards their behaving like him.

But the third servant tells the master what all the poor wished they might: the master is a parasite, living off the labor of others without return to the peasants. By burying the money, he takes it out of circulation, where it can no longer be used to dispossess more peasants from their lands by usurious loans.

This parable, then, far from encouraging "developing our talents," is an indictment of the Powers That Be for reaping where they do not SOW and gathering where they do not scatter seed. What do we, as advocates for people who are hungry, make of this story? If we can let go of identifying the master in the parable with God, we can read this as an indictment of a system that creates poverty and hunger. To endanger its profits, huge as they are, is to challenge the way money and goods are distributed.



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Children's Time

Written by Larry Hollar

The complexity of the Gospel story makes it challenging to suggest a clear approach. If you (or your pastor) plan to take a fairly conventional interpretation of "talent," you may be able to fashion some learning from that about causing the things we're entrusted with to grow and prosper.

An alternative is in the passage from 1 Thessalonians, which talks about the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of the hope of salvation. Make sure you read the other Epistle passages (Romans 13:12; Ephesians 6:13-17) in which the armor metaphors appear. Children have probably seen books and movies about knights and will remember the protective gear they wear. What does that have to do with our loving God? How do we think about the care and protection that our faith in God offers? How is armor a good and also a troublesome way to think about God and faith?

Musical Suggestions

Prepared by Larry Hollar

All Who Love and Serve Your City-UMH 433

Abundant Life-GC 710

We Are Called-FWS 2172

Let Justice Roll Like a River-GC 716

The Harvest of Justice-GC 711

Voices That Challenge-GC 721

Reflection from Hunger for the Word, Year A

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