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The Ways of Jesus: The Messiness of Participation

The Parable of Money in Trust

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Since we are in the middle of football season, I will be hip and relevant by telling you a story about the first time I sort of watched a game on TV. When I about 5 years old, I had a friend whose dad spent most weekends watching sports. During baseball season, he watched baseball. During basketball season, he watched basketball...you get the idea. Football season was his clear favorite. On Sundays, he wore his jersey, gathered his snacks and beverages, and went to the basement family room where we were welcome to join him to watch the game, but we knew shenanigans would not be welcome.

One cold and dreary Sunday, my friend and I were having trouble finding something to do. We decided to follow our noses and go where the popcorn was, the family room with her dad. When we got there, we found that my friend's mom had the same idea. Everything was going well while we sort of watched the game, until something happened. My friend's dad stood up and yelled something like, "Throw the ball!" and then a word we weren't allowed to say. Horrified, my friend's mom reminded him there were little ears present and said, "Stop being an armchair quarterback." I wanted to ask her what that meant, but I sensed it was not the time for questions. My friend and I scurried away, and I decided an armchair quarterback must not be a good thing.

I was right. "Armchair quarterback" refers to someone who doesn't actually participate but still makes judgments about it, someone who prefers to supervise and critique rather than doing something. It probably isn't hard for us to think of a time when we have been "coached" by an armchair quarterback. It's not fun. Even knowing that, there are times I find myself armchair quarterbacking the way other people act, wondering why people can't just act right. The Parable of the Talents gives us an opportunity to talk about that as it invites us into the oppressive economic system of the 1st century Mediterranean world and the ways in which 3 different oppressed acted. I am going to read the version found in the Gospel of Matthew because scholars think it is closer to the original story Jesus would have told his first followers.

This is Matthew 25:14-30:

¹⁴ “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned the people he had enslaved and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. At once ¹⁶ the one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those people who were enslaved came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

The author of Matthew has added a lot of stuff to Jesus’ original story, which probably went more like this: A rich man going on a trip entrusted a lot of money to people he had enslaved. The people entrusted with the money handled it in different ways. The master returned to settle accounts. The people who were enslaved who made a profit with the money were promoted. The one who hid his money in the ground, where it did not accumulate more, had it taken away and given to the one who had accumulated the most money. The end.

Whatever point Jesus was trying to make is in this part of the story.

Before we get to that, I want to be aware of Matthew's use of the story. Given the context the author constructed for the parable, wedging it between two other parables that address judgement and the final destiny of human beings, it is clear Matthew was understood the story as an allegory with a similar theme. The man going away was Jesus and his return anticipated a time of final judgment. The tidbits the author added to it, like "enter into the joy of your master," and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" bolsters that interpretation at a time when early Christians were hopeful Jesus would return in their lifetime. In other words, this interpretation addressed what was going on in Matthew's community, not what was going on for Jesus and his first followers.

To begin to understand what Jesus meant, we have to know what was going on then. First, the parable mentions slavery: under Roman rule one in five people were enslaved. The people who were enslaved did not all have the same experiences of their oppression though. They were all oppressed, but that oppression manifested in different ways and to different degrees, depending on their situations. The same is true for marginalized groups today, each person, each subset of any group, experiences oppression differently and reacts accordingly. In Jesus' day, slavery was part of ordinary life and Jesus' followers would have understood all the dynamics associated with it. They knew how the oppressive system around them worked.

Money also features in this story: the master gave each person a lot of money. Even the one talent given to the third person was a lot. Rather than going out and making more money like the other two, the third person went outside and buried it. In his book, *Hear Now the Parable*, Dr. Brandon Scott writes about the practice of burying money, "This activity shows him prudent and trustworthy...In the ancient world, underground was the only safe place...By burying the treasure, the third person ensures a verdict of responsible behavior at the time of accounting." He did the safe thing.

When the master came back, the first two people presented him with their money plus some. They had invested wisely and were promoted. The third person, while not making a profit, had kept the money safe. When the master expressed his displeasure, the person who was enslaved bravely said, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering

where you did not scatter, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” Jesus’ followers would have felt sympathy for the man. Not only had he done a reasonable, responsible thing, for which he did not deserve punishment, he had the courage to tell the master what he thought of him. It was what we call, a mic drop.

Not surprisingly, the master didn’t take it well. He didn’t like that the third person didn’t make more money for him, and he didn’t like his truth-telling. So, he took the talent back from him and gave it to the guy who already had the most money. Maybe if Jesus was here telling the story, if we looked befuddled, he would have followed the story with an explanation. But few of his explanations have been preserved, leaving us to wonder, which I think Jesus would think wasn’t a bad thing either. As you might expect, scholars do not agree on what that point was. New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine writes about that, “Reducing parables to a single meaning destroys their aesthetic as well as ethical potential. This surplus of meaning is how poetry and storytelling work, and it is all to the good.”

A while ago, I read an interpretation of this parable, written by a liberation theologian, that resonated with me. It focuses on the first two people who received the money and our impression of their actions. We like to imagine if we were in someone else’s shoes, we would do things differently, better. We kind of “armchair quarterback” other people’s decisions. “If I had been there, I would have told that master what I thought.” “If he had given me 5 talents, I would have made more money, but I would have given the profit to the people who really needed it, not the master.” We like to think we would buck the system like the third person. We don’t like to think we would just go along with the oppressive system, but we do it every day.

There are complicated reasons for people not bucking the system, learning to excel and thrive within it, especially when there aren’t many options, especially if the people are some of the most oppressed. We must see that even when people inside the oppressive systems make what we consider bad choices, they are not the ones responsible for the oppressive system. Maybe the risk is too high for them to speak up. How often have we heard about people who put up with misogyny from supervisors because they fear being fired? That is the basis of the #metoo movement. Another reason we don’t buck the system is that we benefit from it, and we prioritize what is best for us even when it comes at a serious cost

to others. Like people who have experienced poverty but have beaten the odds and climbed out and now embrace the false narrative of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. And sometimes people who are oppressed don't realize the system is bad or at least they think it's "the devil they know." Think about people who vote against their own self-interests over and over. Probably, most of the time, participation in oppressive systems is a messy combination of more than one reason.

Regardless of the reasons for participation, there are benefits for the ones who don't buck the system, but the ones with the real power always benefit the most. One commentator wrote, "It is a complicated and fluid reality---this line we walk between survival, complicity, and holding up systems who despise us [or the people we love]. And it is no accident that we are rewarded when we do." In the parable, a promotion in wealth and power was the reward for participation but let's remember that everything additional the master puts the first two people in charge of still belongs to the master. The people who were enslaved, no matter how hard they worked or how smart they were, would never own any of it and they would always be dependent on the master. That is how oppression works. And the ones, like the third man, who overtly resist, who try to change way the system works, is quickly removed from power so as not to be a risk to the system.

The three people in the parable may not have experienced oppression in the same ways, just as people within any system today don't. Race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and ability all contribute to our position within a system. We have opportunities to resist oppressive systems in all kinds of ways and we have opportunities to go along with them. Sometimes we will be like the third person and sometimes will be like the first two. Sometimes the risk is too much and sometimes we are fooled into thinking our actions don't matter.

But here is what I know. Dismantling oppressive systems is going to take all of us, the ones deeply oppressed and the ones with a lot of power and everyone in between. Fighting among ourselves, criticizing the ways in which allies are resisting oppression or accusing others of not resisting enough, is not the way. And for sure, what the work of dismantling oppressive systems does not need, is more armchair quarterbacks. What it needs is for us to try to change the way things work.

Researcher, author, and professor Brene' Brown has written a lot about leadership and working for change. Today's parable reminds me of something she wrote in her book *Daring Greatly*. I am going to change one word so as not to offend anyone sensitive to swearing. She wrote this, "If you are not in the arena getting your [butt] kicked on occasion, I am not interested in or open to your feedback. There are a million cheap seats in the world today filled with people who will never be brave with their own lives but will spend every ounce of energy they have hurling advice and judgement at those of us trying to dare greatly. Their only contributions are criticism, cynicism, and fearmongering. If you're criticizing from a place where you're not also putting yourself on the line, I'm not interested in your feedback." I don't know anyone who has ever tried to buck the system who hasn't felt that way.

There are a lot of system buckers here and I am grateful for all of you who are in the arena getting your butts kicked. For the ones who are showing up at city council meetings, being present in the very real suffering of people you love, having difficult conversations with friends, family, and neighbors, speaking the truth even while your voice shakes, writing checks to support making justice happen, registering voters, and taking time to explain to young people why kindness and inclusion matter. I see you. No matter how you choose to resist the oppression, desperation, and sadness of the world, keep resisting. And please do not forget, joy is resistance in a world that feels like it is sucking the joy out of life. Find your joy and be brave with your life. Amen.