

Sermon: Why Keep Silent?

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Psalm 90:1-12; Matthew 25:14-30**

Today's Gospel passage follows immediately after last week's reading about the unready bridesmaids and Jesus' command to keep awake. Today, we're asking a different question, and the answer depends on context.

Our good friend, the Rev. Dr. Stan Duncan retells this story in a modern setting. Paraphrasing him, let's say we have three people who are fund managers working for a wealthy property investor. It turns out the boss is a brute and a dishonest man (and when accused of that, he doesn't deny it).

He runs an illegal loan operation (the likes of which are described in Exodus 22:25-27) which more than likely made high-interest loans to vulnerable poor people and took their property from them when they got behind in their payments.

Two of the three managers keep quiet and go along with the program and are rewarded later with more power and money.

But the third denounces the system as a scam, accusing the boss of taking in more income from borrowers than he was owed and, in some instances, stealing from investments he didn't even make. So, he refuses to go along. He holds onto the money entrusted to him by the investor and then gives it back to him unchanged, probably to avoid being complicit in the crime.

The boss responds with a punishment that is swift and deep. He takes the money from him and gives it to those who kept silent and sends the lowly manager into the "outer darkness." Tellingly, no one comes to his defense. Whistle-blowers are often vulnerable. The other managers don't say a word. There's no HR department to go to. There is no law court that would believe him or even want to hear his case.

So, says Stan, here's a thought: Why remain silent? What if the boss were not an investor, but perhaps had been a murderous thug or a sexual predator? Would we go along, or would we speak up? Or would we lower our heads and just keep walking?

For another modern interpretation – and there are many – we turn to our old friends in Solentiname. We’ve heard from them before, but to refresh our memories, forty years or so ago, during the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, a priest named Ernesto Cardenal recorded the reflections of a group of people who lived in an island community called Solentiname. You may recall that every Sunday, the group would gather, read the day’s Gospel lesson, and then discuss it.

In their situation, living in the midst of a revolution, they saw the effects of war up close every day. Little by little, the community began to identify with the rebels and the group eventually became part of the resistance to Somoza. For them divided loyalties gave way to total commitment, and more than a few involuntarily became martyrs.

After the group heard the passage we read today, the first comment came from a man named William, who said, “That was a lousy parable.”¹

Their discussion centered on money and its use, which makes sense in a group that suffered from exploitation and injustice, and it’s a great read, highly recommended.

Fr. Ernesto wrapped it up, saying, “We see that anyone who won’t take risks in order to change the world is condemned to solitude, is separated from humanity.” But Oscar had the final word, saying, “Maybe he’s a criminal...We’ve got to get rid of him.”

These are provocative takes on a difficult parable. In most interpretations, the third servant is almost always vilified. One scholar wrote that “the punishment for neglected opportunity is *deprivation* of opportunity.”² Another said that “out of fear of *failure*, he refused even to try to succeed.”³

These are all looking at the parable with the money in mind. None of them explain what Jesus and Matthew were getting at.

This is the last of three so-called parables of the Kingdom told by Jesus in Matthew. Given the nature of the story, the parable begs the question: How is it about the Kingdom of Heaven? Why would Jesus tell a story that’s more about punishment than salvation?

Luke tells a version of this story too, for what it’s worth, except for some details: the units of money are different but is distributed equally; a nobleman journeyed to a distant country to gain royal status; but his own people hated him and sent a delegation to tell the king they did not want him ruling over them; and, at the end of the story, after the

nobleman returns and deals with the money situation, he has his enemies slaughtered in his presence (Luke 19:11-27).

What are we to make of these stories? Both versions of the parable are more about how the wealthy and the powerful treat their employees and enemies than they are about the Kingdom of Heaven. It's easy to mis-read them simply because they are so unlike what we expect to hear. We're upended by them. In the scramble to explain the lesson, we get twisted up trying to make it about Jesus' Second Coming at the end times, or, in that it portrays God as a harsh master, then punishment must be for our own good.

We could say that the talents belong to the master, just as everything – including our lives – belongs to God, and that we are called to be stewards of the Word, and so on.

None of it feels right though. So, what does?

One thing we do know is, it's not a blueprint for a Christian economic system.

In Matthew, the previous two parables of the Kingdom were about faithfulness and readiness. It would make sense that this parable would be about that too. And in the following verses, Jesus talks about the criteria of the final judgement for the righteous when the Son of Man comes, saying, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (25:40). He's talking about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and giving the thirsty a drink, all the simple things good people do for their neighbors in need.

Today's parable is somehow part of all that. We'll have to look long and hard to see faithfulness and readiness to serve God here, but, as hard as it may be to find, the parable is in fact about faithfulness.

Our friend Stan was right when he said the third servant didn't buy into the system, and that's a clue. We believe he didn't buy into it simply because he was being faithful to himself and to the Law and to the way he thought he should conduct his life. He's faithful to his boss too, though he be a harsh man used to reaping what he did not sow, in that he returns exactly what he was given, no more and no less, having kept it safe in faith.

That makes more sense to me, especially when we recall that Jesus said that "the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost," not to cast them into the darkness.

A blogger named Symon Hill wrote that “If Jesus had wanted only to issue straightforward instructions, he would not have told parables. They are meant to make us think.”⁴ And as I read the parable, the following saying came to mind: ‘We do this not because it’s easy, but because we *thought* it would be easy.’

So, over the course of the week, and after a lot of reading, I came to reject the parable’s image of a punishing God, if we see God in the master’s role.

Even if the first two servants invested wisely and were rewarded, it was only because they had done a very un-Jewish thing, which I also can’t accept.

Nor do I believe that God would consign someone to the outer darkness for not taking a risk with something that belongs to God, even if we convince ourselves that their failure was in not doing the work of the church or by running a poor stewardship campaign, or whatever else we can think of to explain the parable’s meaning.

Given the surrounding context, from what we know that God requires of us, from what we know about Jesus’ ministry, and from knowing that at this point in the story, Jesus was on his way to the Cross, I came down on the side of faith.

William called this a lousy parable because it was all about speculating with money, and he’s right if that’s all we see in it. If we deal with a ruthless, greedy boss, we must invest and produce a return, or there’s no reward;⁵ there will be no Christmas bonus.

But what if we reverse the parable?

God is not a ruthless exploiter. We don’t play it safe with God because we know God to be patient and merciful, nor do we have to invest or make a profit to get along with God.

They say that if you go looking for trouble, you’ll find it. In the same way, if you look for faith, you’ll find that too, and you will not want to keep silent about it.

Amen.

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¹ Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 479-486.

² T.W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1949), 249.

³ John Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 160-108.

⁴ Symon Hill blog, <https://symonhill.org/2014/08/21/misreading-the-parable-of-the-talents/>

⁵ David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables: A Homiletic Guide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 173.