

Stanford Memorial Church

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Rebecca Lyman

“To whom much is given much is expected.” Do you know this quotation? I was shaken awake to hear it used by John Boehner last week as a response to the mid-term elections, and remembered that it is also used by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (who spoke so well at commencement last year), posted on their web site, and taught to Bill by his mother. A bit of Gogging revealed that George Bush (the Younger) used it regularly; it was quoted by Condi Rice, as did Eliot Spitzer in his fall from grace as did Oprah in her explanations of mental abundance as did Tim Cook of Apple, quoting JFK who used it fifty years ago. The quotation is emblazoned over the Red Wings locker room door at Joe Louis hockey arena in Detroit, and was attributed by the New York Times to JFK, Voltaire or Spider Man.

This quotation is actually from the Gospel of Luke (12.48). I was also raised on it in mid-century Michigan—and it comes from another parable about obedient servants and punishment, with a certain slippage between the original “required” and the more usual “expected.” You can see how the call to responsibility makes it a handy tag in our modern meritocracy America with “expectation” being a bit easier than “requirement” for tapping abundance, but still separated from the stark judgment of the original parable or our parable this morning from Matthew (25.14-30).

Matthew is the only gospel that preserves this perplexing story of the talents. It is placed right after the parable of the foolish virgins, who wasted their resources and therefore missed greeting the Bridegroom: keep awake is the lesson of that story, another warning for believers. In the story we just read, the Master gives a substantial amount of money to three servants, and upon his return rates the result: the ones who invested and increased are rewarded, and the one who buried them in fear is berated and cast out: those that have will receive more, and those who have little, what they have will be taken away.

Rings true, doesn't it? This sounds like our headlines. This is the dark side of the prosperity gospel, the shadow side of capitalism in which those who do not prosper in systems of abundance must be at fault in some way. The poor therefore deserve nothing because of their inability to get ahead: welfare queens, moochers. A sociologist, Robert Merton, in fact invented the "The Matthew effect": why do the successful continue to achieve? He attributed it to social networks and notoriety, so that inventions are usually attributed to those who have fame rather than those who do the work (watch out, graduate students!). And there is also "Stigler's law": "No scientific discovery is named after its own discoverer." And of course the bitter exegesis from Billie Holiday, weary of being soaked by her poor relations: "Them's that's got shall get, them that don't shall lose. So, the Bible says and it is still is news: Papa may have, Momma may have, God Bless the Child whose got his own."

So what is the good news in this harsh parable? Liberation theologians argue that in fact this is a story to overthrow the system: the master is harsh and the non-compliant servant is actually the hero of the tale when heard by those in servitude. Eusebius of Caesarea depends on a lost version in the Gospel of Hebrews in which only the moderate investor is rewarded, and the excessive profit maker, who has inevitably wasted excess on harlots and flute girls (prodigal son?) and the fearful one are both cast out: a sort of moderate Republican view.

I think however Jesus is asking us to consider—and reconsider—the nature of divine abundance, which we do not in fact increase, but which we can destroy and hoard or share and flourish. The well of divine abundance within yourself and around you, all of which is God given (lilies, sparrows, the grass) does not belong to you, though it is like your breath and blood all that you in fact are. You are a child of God, and the result of this means that everyone else is too. This is a sacred world, all created by God. You therefore cannot hoard and exploit without serious damage to the truth of it in regard to yourself as well as the welfare of everyone else. So, another version in the Gospel of Thomas 41: “Whoever has something in his hand will receive more and whoever has little will be deprived of even the little he has.”

And as needs to be said again and again, Jesus talks more about money than sex: the foolish man planning his new storage barns who dies that night; the wealthy man who refuses the beggar (Dives and Lazarus) and then complains he was uninformed about the need for justice and charity; the young perfectionist who cannot get through the eye of the needle; the pearl of great price, the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the terrible call to the truth that we are as temporary, and ordinary and as

beautiful as the grass, the wild flowers, and the sparrows. Whether it is laying up riches of piety (our Christian projection on the Pharisees) or laying up wealth, Jesus questions whatever basis of security we have and how we hold it. He offers us a different “economy”, i.e. the running of the household in Greek, which has to do with being part of a larger economy of the creation.

If you are a child of God, everyone else is too in this contingent creation. This is the deeper and terrible justice, the fact of our community lurking beneath our grasping and our systems, whether theological or economic about who is saved or successful, who is in or out. There is no “other”, no lesser to exploit or dominate or waste or throw away. No justifications to frack something spiritually or economically. Beyond mercy or meritocracy is fundamental equality of our interconnectedness as creatures of God. This habitat of created connectedness is like the traditional religions of the earth or St Francis by being centered on shared abundance and community and love. If God gives all, there can be no definitive meritocracy in the kingdom of heaven because there is ultimately no individual self-creation in our web of community, habitat and God: all of us who teach and are taught know this. And how can there be a hierarchy of mercy/philanthropy, if an abundance from outside ourselves is the source of all we exchange and build and heal and thrive upon? The problem is distribution, the problem is hoarding, the problem is us. The poor give more because they know about community and need, which are part of the human condition. Isn't this the message of the Prodigal Father to the eldest Son: there are no favorites, there is no scarcity, the message of love is exchange, and gratitude, and through this is replenishment, a

beloved community, to whom more is given and never taken away. This then is the gospel—not our strenuous do gooding nor our selfish quietism nor our activist despair—it is confidence to see and live together within the great good beyond us all, the shared abundance of existence itself.

Let me close with a quotation from Dorothy Day, spiritual writer and social activist, about relation and justice and love:

“What we would like to do is change the world—make it a little simpler for people to feed, clothe and shelter themselves as God intended them to do. And to a certain extent, by fighting for better conditions, by crying out unceasingly for the rights of workers, of the poor, of the destitute—the rights of the worthy and the unworthy poor, in other words—we can to a certain extent change the world; we can work for the oasis, the little cell of joy and peace in a harried world. We can throw our pebble in the pond and be confident that its every-widening circle will reach around the world. We repeat, there is nothing we can do but love, and dear God—please enlarge our hearts to love each other, to love our neighbor, to love our enemy as well as our friend.” (1946)

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Dorothy Day
June 1946