

**"Following the Leader(s)"**  
**Texts: Psalm 22 Luke 19: 11-28**  
**The Reverend Sara A. Hayden**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
**Atlanta, GA**  
**March 21, 2010**

*He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them,  
"Do business with these until I come back." Luke 19:13*

For years I've gathered from friends and family the essential bits of wisdom that one must know to make it in Atlanta. Imagine this Midwesterner's joy when I saw the following book cover leap out at me at the library: "Suck in Your Stomach and Put Some Color On" -- What Southern Mamas Tell Their Daughters that the Rest of Y'all Should Know, Too. Eureka! It has been -- if not my most fruitful source of introduction to life in Atlanta -- certainly my most entertaining.

There's Debbie Wilson's warning from her mother: "always remember: Mom and God are watching you." Or the rather strange, "If you let anyone look at me after I'm dead, I will haunt you for the rest of your life." My personal favorite, is from Betty Halley of Mer Rouge, Louisiana: "Mama always said, "nice girls don't do that." She never said what "that" was."

When you live in a culture your whole life, you learn the unspoken rules, whether you choose to follow them, or not.

Which is why it's not surprising that when the slaves in this morning's parable received money from the nobleman, they knew exactly what they should be doing with the coins he dropped into their open hands. As Jesus tells us, the first two slaves get to work right away, and when the master returns, they have turned a profit for the boss. The money belonged to him, they knew, although the gain was their responsibility.

The comfortable cadence of the story ends here. The third slave had something else in mind for the master's arrival. Defiant, he returns the pound entrusted to him, crumpled up in a linen napkin, and speaks the words his people both long *and* fear to hear him say: "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow."

Consider the scene. I imagine his witnesses holding their breath and staring at their bare feet. What consequences await to the whistleblower, and those connected to him? Jesus tells us that we're dealing with a master who has traveled to distant lands to "get royal power for himself." His authority was absolute. When at long last his power is compromised, he turns to violence.

The third slave has violated rules no one questioned. Life in the ancient world was organized into three basic spheres -- the household, the city, and the kingdom -- the power in the kingdom itself was held by men like this master. Each kingdom, like a quilt, was patched together by the nobleman's relationships and investments, which he carried by traveling abroad and securing royal power.

For the accumulation of wealth and power to continue in his absence the nobleman entrusted portions of it to household slaves who managed his investments for him. For the slaves the goal was twofold: make enough money to secure and double the master's investments; and slowly and carefully, stash away what you can for yourself.

This scheme was no secret to the master. As William Herzog notes, "in fact, the master stands to gain a great deal by encouraging the process. Not only do the retainers do his dirty work, exploiting others for profit, but they siphon off anger that would otherwise be directed at him and his class."<sup>i</sup>

There's plenty to be concerned with in this parable, whose effect is as potent today in Atlanta as it was in first-century Galilee. Which is why it may surprise you to know that most interpreters have come to tidy moralistic consensus about this parable. When I looked on the Internet to find other preachers' beliefs about this story, this is a prime example of what I found:

God has endowed every one of us with talents. He wants us to develop our talents. Use properly what God has given you, work on it, and you will receive more. And a lazy person will lose even what he now has.

In dozens of interpretations of this story I encountered, the nobleman represents God. This is deeply problematic.

God is *not* the divine mortgage broker. The question *this* parable raises is *not*: what do we do with our God-given talents? The question is: whom do we choose to follow? Will we follow the one who manipulates and controls, or do we have the audacity, like the third slave to follow God's insistent call toward justice?

When I was a child in Language Arts class, I remember filling out worksheets about the stories I read. Who was the author? What happened in the story? Who was the main character? The answers in the back of the textbook mystified me. The main character, according to the textbook, was the one who got to speak the most and came out on top, rather than the one whose brief action marks the very moment in which the world as we know it, turns. The one to watch, in Jesus' parable, is not the aristocrat who seems to call the shots, but the slave who risks everything and in so doing ushers in a new reality -- for master, slave, and those who listen in.

Speaking of textbooks, maybe you've heard of the battle waging in Texas schools. Of late, debate centers on which historical material to include in educational curriculum. As one of the largest purchasers of textbooks in the country, what Texas decides will likely

influence what our children read around the nation. One member of the Texas State Curriculum Board successfully moved to eliminate Oscar Romero -- one of the most influential, and religious, voices against oppression in world history -- from the educational standards.<sup>ii</sup> Why? She didn't know who he was.

Perhaps that is because the nobleman nearly always receives center-stage access to our historical memory. Four decades ago and an ocean away, thousands and thousands of people were tortured -- quite literally -- by the same reality as the slaves Jesus tells us about. Romero, a Catholic priest, was named Archbishop of El Salvador in the midst of a terrible war against the country's poorest. In El Salvador (like most places in the world) the majority of people walked a tightrope: save enough to literally feed and clothe your family, and if you're lucky, avoid the scrutiny of those with weapons and power.

Archbishop Romero had grown up among the people, but as those closest to him tell, over the years he lost touch with their experience. The people feared Romero's election would solidify the Church's alignment with the government forces whose theology and practice threatened the people's lives.

In El Salvador, what you believed, or perhaps, more accurately, Who you believed in, was a matter of life and death. When the people sang about God in their hymns, they said:

You are the God of the poor;  
The simple, human God,  
The God who sweats in the street;  
The God of leather-skinned face.  
That is why I speak to you; T  
he way my people speak,  
Because you are the laboring God;  
You are the working Christ.

You walk hand in hand with my people,  
You struggle in the field and city,  
You stand in line out in the projects,  
To receive your day's wages.

I have seen you in the fish shop,  
bartering what you caught,  
I have seen you at the gas station,  
checking tires of a truck,  
You are not ashamed of this humble work,  
You are the worker Christ.<sup>iii</sup>

In the echo of these songs, two peasants -- a young boy and an old man, -- and a priest were murdered by a government aligned with Catholic aristocracy. Romero

showed up at the funeral that night, and he saw the look of grief and resolve in the peoples' faces, his true conversion began. As his friend and priest Jon Sobrino writes:

Romero's conversion -- the definitive factor, the one that kept him faithful to God's will to the end -- was his people, a people of the poor ... And the fact is, as I have already remarked, that in El Salvador, as in so many other places in Latin America, before the church had made an option for the poor, the poor had made an option for the church. They had found no one else to defend them, not in the government, not in the armed forces, not in the political parties, and not in private enterprise.<sup>iv</sup>

The Christ Romero encountered that night had an option for those who felt they had no options. This was a God who stood alongside the people and through his identification with their own suffering, brought liberation.

These people heard the words of the psalmist, -- "For You did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; you did not hide your face from me, but heard me when I cried to you." -- and took them as literally.

They have had enough bad experiences in life to know that only the *good* Lord's power can save them. And so the good Lord abided with them, even as many men, and women, and children disappeared, until even one day Archbishop Romero, too, was killed as he lead the peoples' mass. The words he spoke earlier that week, had prepared them for the journey to come:

If they ever take our radio, suspend our newspaper, silence us, put to death all of us priests, bishop included, and you are left alone -- a people without priests -- then each of you will have to be God's microphone. Each of you will have to be a messenger, a prophet. The church will always exist as long as even one baptized person is left alive!<sup>v</sup>

Perhaps these words resounded in the heart of the slave who cried "foul!" When the presence of a new possibility is made known to you, finally, those of heart and courage become partners with God.

Have you heard this startling prayer?

God, send your Spirit out upon us, because if you are with us, nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, nothing else matters.

In this Lenten season, this is our prayer, this is our hope. Friends, this is the promise: Jesus' journey to the cross is not a tragic journey toward death; those who follow him become partners in a powerful movement toward life. In the words of one great theologian, "The gospel is a light burden in the sense that the more one bears it, the more one is borne by it."<sup>vi</sup>

As always, the best parables leave us with as many questions as answers.

What is hope? What is prophecy? What is martyrdom? And what is salvation?

And when we turn to ask him, he has headed up in front of us, to Jerusalem. And soon we will know what salvation means. Soon, we will know. Adelante, Señor. Onward, Good and righteous Lord.

---

<sup>i</sup> William Herzog, Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994. p. 160.

<sup>ii</sup> You can see a four-minute video from Jon Stewart's the Daily Show, which aired on March 17, 2010, at <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-march-17-2010/don-t-mess-with-textbooks>

<sup>iii</sup> "Misa popular nicaragüense." Misas centroamericanas: transcripción y comentario teológico. Ed. por José María Vigil y Angel Torrellas. CAV-CEBES, 1988. My translation.

<sup>iv</sup> Jon Sobrino, Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples. Orbis, 2003. p. 19.

<sup>v</sup> Sobrino, 35.

<sup>vi</sup> Karl Rahner