

Sermon: November 13, 2011  
The Rev. George Anastos

Matthew 25:14-30

## True Justice Is Intentional Mercy

It matters where we do our theology from; it matters deeply where we do our theology from.

In the history of the Christian church, there has been largely one sermon, and one sermon only, preached on this text. I suspect most of you have heard that sermon so many times you know exactly how it goes – something along these lines: we are given talents from God (and by the way that’s actually where the word comes from in English: from this story in scripture). We get talents from God and we are to use them; we are to develop them so that God will be glorified. If we use them well, we are rewarded. If we use them badly, we are condemned. And if you do not use your talents well God will say “you wicked, wicked, horrible, worthless slave, you are cast out, you are damned.” My conservative colleagues will be preaching that general theme and will be saying you will be damned. My more liberal colleagues will be saying the same thing but a little more gently: “Well I know it seems harsh but God really has no choice, it’s your fault”. You wicked, worthless slave. Has anybody heard that sermon before? From the number of nods I am seeing, it is quite a few of you.

It matters where we do our theology from; it matters deeply where we do our theology from.

When Jesus told this story originally he told it to peasants, and that is a context that we have a great difficulty understanding in today’s day and age. You see, Jesus did not tell this to people at the center of power, at the center of society. Jesus went way out to the margins of society to preach his sermon. He was preaching his gospel to a people that felt neglected: the 99% of the society that had 1% of the wealth. And when he preached this story to them, they knew immediately what was going on, because this was *their* story. This was what life was like for them. This is important because in the beauty of Jewish scriptures, the Law was always designed to help drive society toward equality. It was always designed so that everyone would have enough. It talk people to love the immigrant as themselves. It taught people to love their neighbors as themselves. If a loan was given to someone, that loan must be given without interest. And if someone has to give up their land for the loan, after a certain amount of time that land is given back to the family so that family might continue to have the dignity of being able to provide for themselves. That was the beauty of the law. . . . But that’s not the reality that the people lived. Rather than equality, the system drove inequality. Let’s look at today’s lesson.

When this master, this landowner, went away, it was very normal and those hearing the story nodded because this happened all the time. You see, very few people owned such a massive amount of land and the few who did had to go away for a long periods of time. They would make their way around the Mediterranean basin to develop the relationships with the other extremely wealthy people and to be able to figure out where the niche markets were and what crops they were going to grow in their lands so they would be able to garner more and more wealth. This was normal. The peasants hearing this story knew it was normal, and they knew why the land owner was doing it. While the owner was gone, his wealth was entrusted to the very small group of people who were the retainers. Those retainers would in fact take that wealth and try at a minimum, according to the code of Hammurabi, to

double that wealth for the land owner. Here's the kick – once they have doubled the wealth, which is what the land owner expected, the rest they got to keep as theirs. That was the system.

Now there was only one place that the retainers could go to increase their wealth and that was to the peasants. The peasants really struggled. Not only did they have to pay the temple tax of a tithe, they had an extremely large tax they had to pay to Rome to be able to support those troops that occupied and oppressed them. They had to pay for that privilege. Think about it.

How did the retainers gouge the peasants? When a peasant owned a bit of land and there was a drought or an infestation, what did they do? In order to have the seed to grow the next crop they took out a loan. From whom? From the only place they could go, the landowner, and the landowner's retainers. And then when they didn't get a good crop and couldn't pay it back, the land was taken from them because that was the collateral. So that was the deal, and they were never going to get it back. They then became day laborers. So rather than being someone that scraped by with a small amount of land, now they have lost their land to the landowner, who now owns more, and you become a day laborer. You have heard Jesus tell stories about this: where one person would wait to be hired – "will they hire me and if they hire me will I barely get enough to feed my family?" That was bad enough. But the worst part was when the landowner decided a particular day laborer was cast out. And when you were cast out, you could not even work as a day laborer. And when you did not have that, there was no way to support your family. It was a death sentence and intended to be a death sentence. A slow, horrible, painful, dying of starvation and watching your children die of starvation. That's what it was intended to be as an example to others – don't mess with the system.

When Jesus told this parable, the peasants got it immediately—a story of exploitation and ruthless greed. And unlike the way it's been presented in the church for so many centuries, the hero of the story is not the one who made double the amount of money for the landowner. The hero of the story is instead the one who hid it and said, "I'm giving you back what you own." The landowner at this point said, "You wicked slave. You should have at least invested for interest." Ah, we might not get that today, but that was response of the landowner was the key line in the whole parable. Remember what we said earlier? The Jewish bible forbade lending at interest. So when the peasants heard this they thought, "Yeah, interest, the very thing that is forbade by Jewish law." The landowner is saying, "You should have at least given me that."

So what Jesus was doing was using this as a way to condemn an unjust power system. How, then, did it happen that this parable instead become used by the church to be a justification for the power system? Curious, isn't it? I suggest to you something that I have suggested in the past; it happened when the church shifted from being a peripheral part of society, a voice from the margins speaking toward the center, and instead became itself the center of power under Constantine, a voice at the center justifying its central role by condemning and exploiting the margins.

It matters where you do your theology from. It matters when you do your theology from the center and you justify the way a society is set up – that's one thing. But when you do your theology off in the margin from a place of poverty, from a place where others have so little, your theology looks very, very different.

Roman Catholic archbishop Romero in El Salvador began to work with the poor in that nation. He began to see the injustice. He began to see the El Salvadorian death squads killing the villagers when they tried to eke out a living on their own, when they wouldn't give enough money to the landowners. And he started to speak up. He started to say, "This is wrong." He started to use parables like the one we

heard read today and say, “No, it is not intended to justify the landowner having more. It’s intended to bring up the inequality that exists and abolish it. On March 24, 1980, seven days before I was ordained, he was assassinated by death squads as he was holding his hands up celebrating the Eucharist in church. One of my professors at divinity school was one of his dear friends, Father Henri Nouwen. Father Nouwen sat in class that Monday morning and sobbed that his friend had made himself so vulnerable because he was trying to speak for the poor. That’s just one example.

Another theologian, Hans Küng, was forbidden by his church to teach the faith because he wrote a book called *On Being a Christian*. In that book he presented this “marginal” side of Jesus. He was forbade by the church from ever teaching again.

Or another example from just the last couple of years. This example is from what I would call the center of American Evangelicalism, the center of what I would consider the center of power of our society. This center of power has been attacking theologians like Brian McClaren, Rob Bell, Sister Joan Chittister, and others, because they speak to this “marginal” view of Jesus. This is the criticism they get from one of the leading voices of American evangelicalism: “They have recast Jesus as a limp-wristed hippie in a dress with a lot of product in his hair who drank decaf and made pithy statements about life while shopping for the perfect pair of shoes.” Who is Jesus really according to this kind of centrist theology? Who is Jesus according to this voice from the center? “Jesus is a prize fighter with a tattoo down his leg, a sword in his hand, and a commitment to make someone bleed. This is who Jesus is. This is the guy I can worship, I can’t worship the hippie, the diaper Jesus, the halo Jesus, because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up.” Wow. And Jesus said, “Come unto me all ye you labor in heavy laden and I will give you rest. For I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. If someone punches you and knocks you down, get up and turn the other side of your face so they can hit you.” Jesus said, “If someone comes up to you and takes your wallet, take off your coat and give that to them too.” Jesus said, “Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you.”

It matters where we do our theology from.

Now I’m going to use an example here that poses a great danger. The danger is that when a minister takes a stand on something, you can guarantee there is going to be a certain percentage of the population that is going to be deeply upset. As someone said to me last night at the Rwanda committee as we were all having dinner, “If you’re doing your job, you are making someone angry.” It takes talent, however, and years of experience to be able to preach in such a way that you do not anger one side but instead anger both sides! That’s what I’m going to do for you here.

Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Denver, Oakland, Philadelphia, I saw Occupy Fort Collins when I were up there yesterday. Join the 99%. Is it true that there is injustice in our system? I put myself on the line right now: you bet your sweet bippy it’s true. It is. In the Denver Post this morning was an editorial about the analyses that are being done in study after study. In the past number of years and in the past generation, the average American spending power has gone down 4%. But in the top 1% of wage earners, particularly the top 10% of the top 1%, their spending power is increasing exponentially. Never in American history has the gap between rich and poor been wider. Is there injustice here? Is there a reason for the Occupy Wall Street movement? Yes.

It matters where you do your theology from.

Imagine now, you’re a woman in the Kenombe village just outside of Rwanda. You’re living in a mud hut and caring for some children that are not yours. Why? Well, either their entire family was ripped apart by machetes during the genocide in the mid-1990’s, or their family has died of AIDS in that

horrible epidemic. This woman is at us as we are facing that other 1% in our land complaining that there is injustice here. She, however is looking at our backs and saying, "You might be the 99 % of the United States, but you are still the 1% globally, and the rest of the world is the 99%." It matters where you do your criticism from. In a study done by two different organizations, to just give an example of what it means to be the 1% in all the world, which includes just about all of us sitting here in the Sanctuary: Americans throw away 40% of their food; we throw away 225 million tons a year, enough to feed 925 million people a year, double the population of the United States. That's how much we throw away. That's how many people are living in poverty. It matters where we do our theology from.

So this lesson today holds a tension for us. Do we come to church so we can be justified in who we are now? Do we come to church to be challenged to be who we can be even later today? It matters where we do our theology from.

Archbishop Romero, shortly before he died, spoke of this struggle, the struggle of where we're trying to live good lives now and also be transformed to living more like Jesus tomorrow. He wrote, "It helps now and then to step back and take the long view. The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything." And he goes on, "This is what we are about. We plant seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for God's grace to enter and to do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."

So may it be. So may it be. Amen.