

"Boston Harbor a teapot tonight!"

On a cold and rainy December 16th, 1773, about 5,000 Bostonians packed this building, waiting to hear whether new shipments of tea, that have arrived down the harbor, will be unloaded for sale. When the captain of one of the ships reported that he could not leave with his cargo on board without first paying duty, Sam Adams rose to shout: This meeting can do no more to save the country." A howl erupted. Cries of "Boston Harbor, A Teapot Tonight" rang out from the crowd and about 150 men, some apparently dressed as Native American, marched down to Griffin's Warf, stormed aboard 3 ships and threw 340 tea chests overboard. An infuriated British government responded with the so-called coercive acts of 1774, which, among other things, closed the port of Boston until the locals compensated the East India Company for the tea. That never happened. And this was the spark that started a revolution.

The congregation that worshipped in this meeting house, that debated here and dreamed of liberty here – this congregation likely heard our gospel passage preached many a time. It's one of those parables that holds layers of meaning, that is both confounding and convicting. It is a gift of scripture that this text is alive, and it comes alive to us in different ways depending on the lens with which we view it. Because we strive to make scripture relevant to our lives, we are constantly working to bring it into our present day context and then find meaning. The first three times I preached this parable I viewed it from my own context – where the slave who is punished is punished justly. He buried his talent instead of investing it. Surely God wants us to invest our talents and be profitable. It's a banking model of salvation.

But if this is the lesson Jesus was teaching – and we are the recipients of the gifts of God – don't you think it's strange that God doesn't play fair. Even worse, does this mean that we are to see God as harsh, exploitative and corrupt – for the master in this story acknowledges that the 3rd slave's characterizations are accurate. Perhaps then this story is about more than just how to turn a profit for God. John Dominic Crossan would have us unravel our understanding of this passage and – attempt to view Jesus' story, not through the eyes of our 21st century selves, but through the eyes of the community who first heard it.

The parable of the Talents or the Master's Money is among those parables of Jesus present in the gospels both inside and outside of the New Testament: in Matthew, Luke and a different version of it in the Gospel of the Nazarenes, an expansion of Matthew's Greek text used by Christian Jews from western Syria in the first half of the second century. In that version of the story it is the one who hides the master's money – not the one who earned interest – that is accepted with joy.

The two versions of the Master's Money in Matthew and Luke contain the only mention of "interest" in the entire New Testament (Matt 25:27, Luke 19:23). However, there are several mentions of it in the Old Testament – and every single one of them is negative. From Exodus 22 "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them." It is surely strange, then, to presume that the first two slaves are a positive and the final one a negative example – for a first-century Jewish audience faithful to covenant and tradition. In other words, is the audience being provoked to

agree or disagree with the master's actions? To agree or disagree with which slave's actions? And thereby to think for or against that multiplication of money known as interest.

As Crossan writes: the parable is not simply about interest, but about the world. Or, better, it is about world as embodied here in interest, as incarnated here in profit. The parable challenges you to think about these questions. What about interest and gain? Who are the winners and who are the losers? Do you live by the Torah or the practices of Rome? How are God's gifts to be used to support all of creation, and not just profit the few? Jesus's blunt question is – do you stand with the greedy or the needy? And what will you risk?

Slaves 1 and 2 knew that the master whose money they invested had come by it dishonestly, and they multiplied the money, earning interest through an oppressive economic system, tied to empire, that disadvantaged the vast majority while benefitting a very few. But Slave 3 says he was afraid – not afraid of his Master, but emboldened by a righteous Fear of God, that lays bare exploitation and injustice for what they are and calls us to account. Emboldened the third slave stands up to power and speaks the truth with courage – “you are a harsh man, you reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter.”

I wonder how Phillis Wheatley heard these words. Sitting here in the balcony. One of the most famous authors in America, knowing that, for 2/3rd of her life she was slave to a master – a cog in an oppressive financial system, and even upon gaining freedom was essentially penniless. When she uses her pen to stand up to power

and speaks the truth with courage – is she picturing the bold slave who refused to invest in oppression?

And what about us. It is strange to know we are experiencing a moment in history, but I can feel it. And I imagine you can too. Before Covid-19 brought so many to their knees, there were already so many, too many, who were crushed under the weight of injustice, of financial exploitation, of a national narrative that equates a person's worth with their earning potential. The Global Pandemic, and a political atmosphere that elevates pursuit of the holy dollar above even our highest ideals, has only compounded the problem.

It is a time that calls us, that demands of us, that we speak a prophetic word, a word of truth, spoken with courage – knowing that to do so is to risk – there may be tears ahead. But when we are rooted in the Spirit of the Lord, when we recognize that each person deserves the chance to live, and live fully into God's calling upon their lives, then we can stand up and speak bold truth in love. And – unlike the bold slave in this parable – we won't stand alone. There are many, including many of you, who are standing up against injustice, who are calling for a return to decency and truth, who are finding ways to build healing in our communities, and transform oppressive systems. To you, I say, keep going. Christ calls us to take action. To stand up. To use our creativity and our courage, to respond to injustice, call out oppression, and upend systems of exploitation. We are to invest ourselves in the work of building up God's kingdom of mercy and justice, liberation and transformation.