

Rebuke, Disrupt, Shout (Matthew 25: 14-30)

By Rev. Loren McGrail

“Allow dark times to season you.”

—Hafiz

There was a woman, a seeker of truth, who ran through the streets crying, “Power, greed, and corruption! Power, greed, and corruption!” For a while people stopped to listen. Then gradually, they all went back to the routines of the day. But the woman never stopped running, never stopped crying out, “Power, greed and corruption! Power, greed, and corruption! One day a child stepped out in front of her. “Old woman,” the child said, “No one is listening to you.” “ I know that,” the old woman said. “Then why do you shout?” the child asked. “Oh my child,” she answered, “I do not shout in order to change them. I shout so they cannot change me.”

Power, greed, and corruption; this is the theme also of the Parable of the Talents. Yes, the same themes because it is easier to follow the money trail or a “harsh master” who reaps what he hasn’t sown than a God who demands justness and fairness.

This parable is often preached around stewardship Sunday in the United States as a way to ask congregants to tithe more or give more of their time and talents to serve on committees. Talents have often been interpreted as skills or gifts God has given you. However, in the time of Jesus a talent was a sum of money that weighed between 80 and 130 pounds and was worth about 20 years of an ordinary person’s labor. The only people who had this kind of money were the very wealthy who made their money in trade, not taking goods to the market and selling, but by running import and export businesses or charging interest on loans to poor people, especially people trying to live off the land.

These wealthy elite were more than happy to help out and loan money and take land as collateral or charge 60% interest. And if the poor farmer couldn’t make the payment, he lost his land and watched it re-purposed into olive groves or vineyards for products that could be traded. This trading required the financier to travel often and thus leave his household in the hands of his servants, domestic workers, who would keep the books, collect the debts, and charge a little for themselves on the side just as the master had showed them how to do. The master was ok with this sharing or increasing the profit because wealth was wealth and increasing it increased the “joy” for the master. The system worked as long as you didn’t notice or mind if the master never really worked and reaped what you sowed.

In our parable the two servants are fine with this capitalistic arrangement. They were good and trustworthy slaves, while the third slave was treated harshly for his rebuke of his Master because he buried his talents and didn't increase or make a profit. This third slave is disruptive to the status quo. He is kind of a whistleblower, a person who says or does something to get our attention, to make us aware. Whistleblowers are needed, says Sister Joan Chittister, because "If we let injustice go by unnoted, we create the climate for more injustice." Albert Einstein put it another way: "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing." Graffiti on the Bethlehem Wall says, "Silence is complicity."

Blowing the whistle on wrongdoing takes time and energy and persistent effort, and it often means being kicked out into the darkness, as what happened to the third servant. It can also mean being banned or losing your job.

Let me share with you some recent whistleblowers you may have heard about, for their stories affirm what Jesus is trying to illustrate in the parable, which is if you choose to leave or criticize the system of power and corruption, you will pay. The master of this system is harsh and will throw you out for not contributing.

This week many of you might have heard about the Norwegian doctor Mads Gilbert being barred for life from entering Gaza. Dr. Gilbert, you might recall, is the doctor who worked at the Shifa hospital for 50 days trying to save lives. He was also present during Israel's other two bombardments and is an outspoken critic of Israel's policies in general. His being barred from entry to Gaza is equivalent to being thrown into the darkness.

Similar to Dr. Gilbert is my friend and colleague Rabbi Brant Rosen from the Chicago area who was recently asked to leave his congregation over his strong views about Israel's bombardment of Gaza too.

Here is what he said in a recent blog post about his decision to disrupt a fundraiser in Chicago:

Yes, our action was disruptive – that was, in fact, its point. But if these disruptions felt rude and impolite, the discomfort felt in that room was beyond miniscule in comparison to the horrors that were being inflicted at that very moment on the people of Gaza. Our protest was at its very core, an act of *tochechah* ("reproof"), hearkening back to the Biblical dictum "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor and incur no sin because of that person" (Leviticus 19:17). As a Jew I will never forget the tragedy of those two months (referring to Gaza), nor will I remain silent over the crimes that continue to be committed in my name. But I am heartened by those in my community who are increasingly finding the courage of their

convictions. It is truly my honor to be counted with the disrupters, the “nonviolent gadflies” who seek to “dramatize the issue so that it can no longer be ignored.

These whistleblowers, these dissidents, these men of conscience like the third slave expose the harsh truth about injustice in our society and what the cost might be. But each remains steadfast to a vision of humanity and what their faith demands.

If this parable is another parable about what the kin-dom of heaven is like or what the Beloved Community requires, the question for us is what are we doing not to comply with the status quo of greed, power and corruption? Whom are we rebuking? Do we understand like the woman in the Sufi story that our very soul is at risk if we don’t shout out?

Finally, in addition, Jesus’ listeners would have asked themselves this question, a question I wish for you to consider as well: How would I treat a former helper who has now become a whistleblower and has been thrown out of the household? How compassionate am I willing to be? What are the risks? Will I turn him in for a bag of silver? Will I help him carry his cross? And lastly, will I pick up my own cross and walk this Via Dolorosa?

God is not the “harsh master” and Jesus does not want us to increase wealth by usury or using people. He wants us to follow him all the way to Calvary. This parable is an invitation to join him with a warning that this kind of discipleship will be costly.

But dear ones, the good news is that you will not be alone, for the arc of history bends towards justice and though the workers are few they are strong and faithful and will welcome your talents for peace making and justice. Like loaves and fishes your contribution will be enough to feed others. And finally, on earth as it is in heaven means you will have a taste now of what is being served at that heavenly banquet. So dear ones, do not be afraid of the dark for it will season you.

Act out and speak up and if you are barred, you will be in good company. And finally, shout out not for them but for yourself and all those who have ears to hear, for your very soul depends on it, and the coming of the kin-dom of God demands it.

Rev. Loren McGrail is mission personnel for Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ. She serves their mission partner, the YWCA of Palestine.