

Sermon Shark Bites

"I have a feeling, in a few years people are going to be doing what they always do when the economy tanks. They will be blaming immigrants and poor people." — Mark Baum in "The Big Short"

Good morning Grace St. Paulite's, and welcome to another installment of Captain Obvious. Are you ready for the transparent question of the day? Here we go. Has anyone here ever heard a bad sermon? Okay, maybe we should qualify that just a bit. I don't mean just an empty sermon or an intellectually bankrupt sermon or even a boring sermon. I mean a real stinko, a sermon that was so theologically misguided that you wanted to get up and walk out of the building? Anyone?

Listening to sermons has much in common with that classic scene from the original Jaws. Some of us, like maybe someone who has only heard sermons at GSP, may be like Roy Scheider. Perhaps we may have nothing more than an appendix removal mark from those experiences. But the huge majority of us are like Richard Dreyfuss and Robert Shaw, covered with deep wounding scars and perhaps a broken heart as a result of being subjected to God-awful theology from the pulpit.

Let me show you some of my Great White Shark scars. They are a result of listening to so-called sermons based on, you guessed it, today's Gospel. One major bite comes from what I will refer to as the stewardship sermon. Coming as this Gospel does during the time of year when most churches, including us, are asking you to consider how you can give of your time, talent, and treasure to best support the church, the preacher will interpret this Gospel something like this; "You see, Jesus is telling us to not waste our talents, like the third slave does, to not bury them in the ground. Instead we are to utilize our God given talents to the fullest, like the first two slaves."

It is true that the word talent in our culture probably came into existence because of this Gospel. But a talent in first century Mediterranean society had nothing to do with an obligatory segment of the Miss America pageant. A talent was a unit of currency. One talent was equal to approximately 6000 denari, and one denari was an average pay for an average day's work. That means that one talent was worth about 15 years wages for a day laborer. Big time money. A sermon that suggests that we should not waste our God given abilities may make an excellent point. But it has absolutely nothing to do with what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. It is a classic case of seeing an ancient writing through the lens of our own culture.

The second big scar I carry comes from what I will refer to as the Goldman Sachs sermon. In it, the master in the parable is understood as God, a God who doubles as a venture capitalist. This God rewards the first two slaves for being ingenious enough to double his money, while throwing the stupid third slave into everlasting perdition for not investing properly. The moral in this interpretation is that savvy investors will enter the kingdom of God, while poor schmucks like Father Richard, who told us last week about his stock market adventures, are all going to hell. It also has appeal as a stewardship sermon, with the preacher telling us that we too must be good stewards of our money, so we can then give a bigger donation to the church.

There are obvious issues with such an interpretation. First, it suggests that Jesus is telling us to be like the sleight-of-hand CEO's who perpetrated the collapse of the housing market on us at the turn of the decade. Or maybe he is saying that it is a good thing to utilize the strategy the guy sitting in the White House used when he was in the business world. You know, the one who stiffed contractors and workers building his hotels in Vegas, Atlantic City and Washington DC to build his profit margin. They would have to sue him in hopes of getting a small portion of the money they were owed. Does that sound anything like Jesus?

Two weeks ago in the Beatitudes, we heard this same Jesus tell us that the most blessed people are the poor and the hungry and the people who have no choice but to protect their meager earnings in the same way the third slave did, by burying them. So now he's changed his mind and has decided that God's first priority is maximum profit return, even at the expense of others? Once again, this is a classic case of seeing a tale from antiquity through the lens of post-modern capitalism.

Shark bite number three. I will refer to this as the lion from the Wizard of Oz sermon. Avoiding the image from the Goldman Sachs sermon that suggests we hold up the president as one of our saints, the preacher concentrates solely on the one positive character trait of the first two slaves in the story. "These slaves," the preacher might say, "were not afraid to take a risk to gain a greater benefit." The moral of the story, is that true Christians have the courage of a lion, that we must be risk takers to live into the kingdom of God. Again, a nice sentiment, but really now, would Jesus use the example of a slave helping a rich guy to get richer as the best illustration of being a risk taker?

All three of these interpretations are classic examples of misappropriating an ancient text into our time. We love this story because it sounds like us. In our get mine, money driven society, we are very much like the master in today's tale. We too honor the first two slaves for doubling his investment. Finally, we think, a story about the capitalistic Jesus. But guess what? A first century Mediterranean peasant audience would have been disgusted by the actions of the first two slaves. That's because there was a completely different understanding of the way things work in the first century. We believe that everyone today should accumulate as much money and goods as possible. We believe this because we understand money as being infinitely available. But first century society was a limited-goods culture. They pictured all of the world's goods and money as a pie. There's only a certain amount to go around, so an increase in the share of one person meant that someone else lost theirs. An

honorable person therefore, never tried to get more of anything. If someone did, they were classified as a robber. Usury was understood in antiquity as one of the causes of the destructive cycle of debt and poverty. According to author Richard Rohrbaugh, the highest legal interest rate at the time was 12%. Profiting from commodity trading therefore, would have been seen not only as immoral, but a grave danger to society. It is in fact, explicitly condemned in Deuteronomy 23. "You shall not charge interest on loans to another Israelite, interest on money, interest on provisions, interest on anything that is lent." Usury is also condemned in secular texts of the time, including the writings of Aristotle. So now imagine listening to Jesus tell this story as if you were one of those peasants. The two slaves who increased their master's wealth were seen as simple thieves. They, just like their master, were literally stealing money from the resources of others.

The only morally responsible person in this story for a first century peasant would have been the third slave, who successfully preserves the master's money. He refuses to participate in the extortionist schemes of the master. And the punishment he receives for doing the right thing is exactly what the peasants expected to happen to them in the real world. This, of course, is not a new story. It is the same old story. Notice that nowhere in this parable does Jesus mention the kingdom of God. That's because he did not intend this story to be about the way things could be, as so many have interpreted it, but rather he meant it as a story about the way things already are. That's why the third slave has his talent taken away and the parable ends with the aphorism that we still use today. "For to all those who have, more will be given, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." Can't you just hear the crowd respond, "Yep, that's how it works. The rich get richer, while we lose even the scraps we have." This is a story the people listening to Jesus knew all too well and not very different than the one we all know today. Economic exploitation and wealth accumulation remain central components of our society. They are held in such high regard

that we promote people who succeed in using the economic system to steal money from workers, and then we elect them president.

When we realize that for the people listening the actual hero of the story is the third slave, suddenly today's Gospel is no longer lame. We now have a model for how to respond to selfishness and greed in our own world. From our worldview, it seems strange that he buried his money, but imagine again that you are a tenant farmer hearing this tale. True wealth, those people would tell us, is produced through hard work, sunshine, rain, and God's earth. This is, in fact, the same clash of values that still haunt us in 21st century America. Our Jeffersonian agrarian roots envisioned a country where we would grow, mature, and gain wealth through a "use-value" system. But instead, what the powerful of our world have done is create an "exchange value" system. Over the last 10 years, we have seen that exchange value system collapse on top of us, as we have realized that there is no actual money to back it up. What Jesus teaches us today through the example of the third slave is that money does not grow naturally, but unnaturally, through smoke and mirrors. That is, in fact, what the third slave accuses the master of at the end of the story. "I knew that you were a harsh man, (that word in Greek is *skerlos*, a word associated with Pharaoh's hardheartedness). You reap," he says, "where you did not sow, and gather where you did not scatter seed." In other words, you are stealing from us. We are all poor because of you. The parable of the talents most assuredly does apply to our world today, but only when we understand that it is a story about greed.

The third slave in this parable is not the loser. He is the Jesus figure in the story, who unmask the master as someone who derives his wealth from the toil of others. He profits from the backbreaking labor of his slaves. So rather than participate in this exploitation, the slave does all that he can from his position. He refuses to participate in this economy that

creates more slaves and puts more money into the pocket of masters. He takes the money out of circulation.

Just like countless others who have stood up to end exploitation of the poor, the third slave is punished for his deed. It will be only a short time later in Matthew's Gospel that Jesus will suffer a similar fate for protecting the marginalized. The story of the third slave is the story of Jesus.

We all know of course, that being Jesus or the third slave is not easy. When we take on this role in society, we too can expect to be banished to the outer darkness by the power brokers of the world. But though we are kicked out of the rich man's system, we are brought closer to the system of God, the kingdom of God.

Does this mean that I am suggesting that we all bury our money in the backyard and never participate in our present economy? Of course not. But I absolutely mean that we are being called to follow the example of the third slave in protesting a broken economic system that rewards people who take advantage of others and actually creates the class of the working poor.

How else might we practically live into the example of the third slave in today's world? There are, of course many ways and Jesus lists a bunch of them in the verses of Matthew's gospel that immediately follow today's parable. Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned.

Perhaps most importantly though, we need to show how the misinterpretation of this parable has justified the greed based economic system of our day. We need to see that not only is it destroying hard working folks lives, but it is also destroying our entire planet. Continually raping the earth to extract oil from it is another instance of how we continue to live into the example of the unscrupulous master in today's Gospel. Our economy today

continues to run on the limited good energy resource of oil. If we are to truly create a sustainable economy, we must end the old story of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. We can begin to create a new story by building an economy based on unlimited sources of energy. That is trickle UP economics, and would go a long way to creating a new paradigm where money and everything else does not get stuck at the top of the financial pyramid. That's what being the third slave might look like today.

In a world of thieving masters and first and second slaves, may all of us have the courage then, to be the third slave. May we continue to stand up in the face of a broken economic system, and work to reform it, even when the power brokers punish us for doing so. May each of us have the boldness to change the old story, and work together to create God's new story, the tale of a world where the poor get richer and the rich are willing to share their abundance with those in need. That beloved, is the dream of the third slave, the dream of Christ and the dream of God. May it also be our dream, a dream that we can realize no matter how many shark bites we get along the way.

Amen.