Voices of Sisters
Social Justice



A young Salvadoran woman participates in the traditional procession of lights Nov. 16, 2024, at the Central American University in San Salvador, during the commemoration of the 35th anniversary of the Jesuit martyrs. In 1989 six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter were murdered on the Central American University campus. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Cabezas)



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Editor's note: *Welcome to Theologians' Corner, where each week a different woman theologian from around the world offers a fresh reflection on the Sunday readings.*



Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 15, 2026

The text for this Sunday begins without any introduction in Matthew 25:14:

> "*For it is as when a man who, as he was leaving on a journey, called his slaves and gave them his fortune to manage. To one he gave five talents, to the next two, to the third one, each according to his ability. Then he departed.*"

It is such a beloved parable, with a moral burned into our memories by an allegorical understanding. "A man" becomes a metaphor for God and "talents" become our gifts.

However, in the church's biblical interpretation, allegory is only one of many possible ways to understand Scripture, especially parables. Actually, allegorical readings can become dangerous if metaphors are taken out of context.

So let us pause and make some observations before we jump to any well-known conclusion.

One talent, depending on the cultural context, was an amount of wealth that is roughly to be compared with 6,000 drachmas. One drachma, in another parable, is the amount for which the woman in Luke 15:8-10 turns her house upside down, because she lost it, then holds a party because she found it. Put in terms of our late-capitalistic U.S. economy, eight talents would be about a billionaire's wealth in first-century Judea.

Then "the man" departed and left his financial affairs in the hands of his freed slaves. This situation is common in first-century Rome. Wealth was made on the outskirts of the empire, but spent lavishly in the great centers of it. These so-called "servants" were no hired servants, but rather liminal social figures whose existence was dependent on the owner's arbitrary mercies. Again, a very common situation, caused by different social pressures for being "set free" as slaves without recovering one's full social agency.

The first-century listeners knew exactly the social-economic situation that is alluded to in the beginning of the parable. To aid in our understanding, we also could look at the word "ability," a translation of *δύναμιν* (*dunamin*). *δύναμιν* holds, clearly, a connotation of power and force, similar to the English cognates dynamo and dynamite. Ability here does not mean skill, or artisan knowledge, or intellectual aptness, but rather force or power. These servants were given wealth in order to use their power to increase wealth for their owner.

Notice that the next sentence begins with "immediately." Both the slave with five and the slave with two talents doubled their holdings immediately. Literally, at the end of verse 16, they had doubled the wealth of "the man." The slave with only one talent, of course, hid it and did not double its wealth.

For the listener of the first century, it must have been clear what this fast, incredibly lucrative financial turnaround meant: exploitation. With force (*δύναμιν*), they squeezed these "talents" from the poorer ones.

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There were many ways to make money in 1 B.C.: agriculture, trade, shipping, nearly always using servitude and slavery. However, the "immediate" way was financial. Collecting debt, increasing interest so the debt could not be paid back, riding interest rates up to 200% was not uncommon, as Roman historians record, and then selling foreclosed properties at great profit.

The long absence of the "owners" of estates in the far-flung Roman Empire is well documented in other places of the Bible and nonbiblical sources. So, when "the man" finally comes back, he is happy with the slaves who doubled his wealth. A translation might be: "You are a joy to your owner." It says it twice: at the end of verses 21 and 23.

However, first the owner also says something nearly cynical: "You have been reliable in a small thing, a small matter." Five talents, even one or two, were huge wealth, at least for the people who were listening to this story! They were not small at all. The Gospel writer wants to make sure the listener hears the cynical attitude of "the man."

Then comes the third slave to say what the first-century listeners must have been thinking by that point: "Master, I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter." In the Gospel of the Jewish Matthew, this is abhorrent behavior.

Then follows an even more amazing admission by the third slave: "I was afraid." It doesn't say, "I was afraid of you, my owner." It says "I was afraid because I knew you reap where you have not sown and gather where you have not scattered."

"I was afraid." The slave knew that his owner was coercing them into the structural network of oppression. It is clear "the man" was acting against God's kingdom. However, the third slave was afraid of God; he feared God as the ultimate judge. This third slave was honest. He hid the wealth, even if it was less than that of the others, then gave it back. For that he was thrown into darkness.

God is present in this parable in the faith and action of the third slave. God is not present in the owner. Jesus, the Jew, does not compare this petty human tyrant with his beloved Father in heaven. Like the third slave, we should all be afraid of ever becoming accomplices in the structural oppression of others at the behest of tyrants trying to double their wealth at all cost.

Coming toward the end of the church year, this parable indeed is an invitation into Matthew's eschatological horizon of discipleship. Remembering this very night the ones who gave their lives at Central American University in San Salvador in 1989, we say: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, [the ones who fear God], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of justice for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

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