

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year A November 16, 2014

Theme: How Much is Too Much?

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Most people would expect to hear a homily today on using our talents well and not burying them in a hole in the ground.

However, Dominican Sister Barbara Reid, a New Testament Scholar at the Chicago Theological Union, pointed out that a talent at the time of Jesus was the largest measurement of money, not an ability or aptitude useful for some activity.

Sr. Barbara noted that a talanton, in Greek, was in fact a huge amount of money, well beyond the means of most people.

For a servant to be handed five talents or talanton was the equivalent of being given, in today's money, \$7 and a half million dollars!

The servant who was given 2 talents got about \$3 million and the final servant a measly \$1 million.

So this parable is about extremely big money and those who manage it.

Note how the third servant describes his Master: **“I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter...”**

And also note the Master does not deny this characterization!

He is a ruthless, greedy, make money-at-any-price type tycoon.

And he has trained his servants well: two of the three double his investment!

What kind of investing does it take to double your money?

How many people, how many communities get trampled along the way?

What happens to the environment, the water, the air, the earth for them to make that money so fast?

One servant, however, decided not to play the Master's dirty money game; this servant opted out and buried his master's money.

This servant chose not to be part of a system where the already rich get richer, and richer at the expense of the poor.

Now this third servant ended up having to suffer the consequences of this choice, but he stood on his principle; he did not participate in the unjust and inequitable economic system where a few became super rich while the many had to live in poverty and squalor.

Now this approach to the parable may strike many as surprising and disturbing, but it would seem especially timely given recent warnings from two surprisingly diverse leaders: Janet Yellen, the Chairwoman of the US Federal Reserve, and our own Pope Francis.

Both have been warning about the dramatically increasing gap between the small percentage of super wealthy and the shrinking amount of money held by the middle class and the poor.

Pope Francis recently posted a dramatic Tweet (for those of you who don't Tweeting or understand how it works, the idea is to use as few words as possible to communicate your message.) Thus Francis Tweeted:

“Inequality is the root of all social evil.”

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We live in an economic system that values the right of the individual or corporation to use freely their talents and enterprise to earn wealth for themselves, the so called free market.

Inequalities arise because some are better at this free market than others.

We constantly argue about, and vote leaders in and out of office based on, the limits government may place on this freedom.

However, Catholic social teaching has always held that we must begin not with the need to maximize economic growth, nor even the right of individuals to recompense for their labors, but with the equal dignity of every man and woman made in the image of God.

In other words, the most significant issue of justice is not the growth of the economy nor the return on investments, but on the dignity of every human person involved in the process.

For example, Catholic moral tradition holds that it is unjust when the CEO of a company makes more in one hour than the average worker in his company, not the janitor but the average worker, makes in an entire year.

Likewise, **“when the 85 richest individuals in the world have more wealth than the 3.5 billion poorest [half the world’s population], that is injustice....”** (Robert W. McElroy, Market Assumptions, America 11/3/2014)

In his stunning letter “The Joy of the Gospel” Pope Francis also wrote:

“While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few.Consequently, they reject the right of states, charged with vigilance for the common good, to exercise any form of control.”
(paragraph #56)

The Holy Father is saying those who have grown extremely rich use their wealth to prevent the government from using its legitimate right to protect the rights of the whole community: for example, fair taxation, environmental protection, health care, equal education, adequate housing, etc.

The interests of the wealthy end up getting protected at the expense of the middle class and the poor.

Again here’s how Pope Francis has voiced it:

“This happens today: if the investments in the banks fall slightly... a tragedy... what can be done? But if people die of hunger, if they have nothing eat, if they have poor health, it does not matter! This is our crisis today!” -- Address at Vigil of Pentecost, May 18

What has happened to us as human beings that our priorities should be so skewed, so boggled that the quest for money becomes more important than our hurting brothers and sisters!

To whom, then, should it be said: **“Well done! My good and faithful servant!”**

The servants who had learned the crooked tricks of their master and increased the already excessive wealth of that ruthless, corrupt tycoon by doubling his multimillion pot of cash?

Or the servant who refused to play the game and buried his million bucks in a hole in the ground, without even bank interest, and gave that dirty money back to the Master dirt and all?