

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes  
Santa Barbara, CA**

33<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A – November 12, 2011

**Gary Becker**

Reflects on **Proverbs 31:10-13,19-20,30-31;**  
**1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30**

**T**he book of Proverbs is part of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Scholars describe it as a “collection of the collections” of wisdom sayings. Like most of the wisdom literature the emphasis of this book is on living a productive life.

Our reading is taken from the last poem in the book. Here the author praises the attributes of the ideal wife. That ideal wife is more valuable than precious stones. She brings good fortune to her family, works hard and reaches out to the poor and needy. Charm, the author reminds us, is fleeting.

Diane Bregant points out that the Hebrew adjective translated as “ideal” has a much stronger meaning than the English word connotes. It signifies strength, power, and worthiness. While the virtues listed do reflect the patriarchal society of the poem’s author, the woman described should not be thought of as subservient. She is described as self-sufficient and in charge of her household. She has been entrusted with her husband’s heart. While we associate the heart with emotions, the Israelites believed it to be the seat of the mind and will. This would indicate that the wife was privy to her husband’s thoughts, reflections, and decisions, and she has succeeded in making her family’s household prosperous so that she is able to share her good fortune with those who had less. In other words, this woman is using her talents well.

Today’s gospel is also all about talents and using them. There are four characters in today’s parable – a wealthy landowner and three workers. This is a familiar parable that

we have heard many times. So I wonder which character is your favorite? How many people favor the wealthy landowner? How many like the worker who got five thousand? How many like the second worker who got two thousand? Finally, what about the third worker who got one thousand and went off and buried it?

Let us look more deeply at this story and see where it leads. This is the third in the sequence of three where Matthew is stressing readiness and being prepared, but I want to suggest to you that this one doesn’t really line up with the other two. Remember that this story is told in the first century, not in the twenty-first. We must be careful not to impose twenty-first century values when we look at this one. As I think you are aware, neither capitalism nor individualism was an aspect of Jesus’ or Matthew’s world.

The traditional understanding of this parable suggests that Jesus is the wealthy landowner. The workers who double the money entrusted to them are praised for using their talents well; however that interpretation does not fit with first century values. Scripture scholars suggest that interpretation is not at all likely to have been Jesus’ original intent. They remind us that Jesus’ followers were peasants and stories about the rich getting richer would not have been good news for them. Usury on their loans would have been what took their land from them, and left them destitute. The landowner would have been judged as arrogant, greedy, and unjust- not an image representative of God. The first two workers would have engaged in actions for-

bidden by the Torah and would not have been worthy of praise or imitation at all.

The third servant, who buried what was given him, engaged in an accepted practice for safe guarding treasures. In chapter 13 Matthew says the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field. The third worker is the honorable one – only he has refused to cooperate in the system in which the owner continues to accrue large sums of money while others go wanting. From this perspective the parable would have served as a warning to the rich to stop exploiting the poor.

Supporting this interpretation is the writings of the church historian, Eusebius. He records a comparable story found in the Gospel of the Nazareans. In it the first servant squandered what the master entrusted, the second multiplied his investment, and the third hid what he was given. That story reports that the third was received with joy, the second was rebuked for usury, and the first was thrown in jail.

So, this parable can be a warning about the ease with which people can be co-opted by an unjust system. What can be done when one lives with an economic system that is marked by deep inequity?

One kind of response has been visible here in the past few weeks as the protest movement Occupy Wall Street has voiced broad-based frustration over how our financial system works. Today's parable offers another image of how an individual can take measures to undermine a system that allows the rich to become richer while the poor become poorer. It can give encouragement to disciples to take courageous measures to expose unfettered greed for the sin that it is. The last part of the gospel is sobering, depicting what can happen to those who blow the whistle on the rich and powerful. So the parable should encourage disciples to stand together as they confront unjust systems, and not to be found in a vulnerable solitary position like the third worker.

You will decide for yourself the correct interpretation of this gospel, but as you do, please read once more the landowner's remarks at the end of this gospel and ask yourself: Does this sound like Jesus speaking? And then read the rest of Mathew 25 beginning with verse 31. Does it seem to fit with this gospel which immediately precedes it?

You decide.