



Listening to the third slave



Preface

Based on Luke 19:11–27 and Matthew 25:14–30

This Bible study came to me while reading “The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening” by Richard Q. Ford. Ford describes how the last few decades have seen a falling away from the idea promoted in 1888 by German scholar and biblical exegete Adolf Julicher that parables could each be reduced to one point. More and more, acknowledgment is made of the listener and how she or he brings context to each parable.

A clinical psychologist with a master of divinity degree, Ford brings a fresh perspective to parables. I recommend the book highly, and I rely on his ideas often in this study. However, the application of this parable to racism and anti-racism is original to this study.

Preparation

The study can be completed in one or several sessions. Do what is best for your group. You may collapse your time frame by choosing not to include all the questions offered. Based on your knowledge of your participants, you may focus on one question more than others, inviting participants to answer the other questions on their own as they review the study for themselves.

Leaders should prepare by prayerfully completing the study, reviewing the biblical texts and reading the discussion questions. Be prepared for women to be surprised by new understandings and insights. The historical interpretation of the Matthew and Luke texts as describing a righteous punishment of a lazy servant is so prevalent that participants may be surprised by this new insight into the parable (Galatians 5:22–26).

What does this study have to do with racism?

This study is about living our faith in a real way. It is about confronting historical White privilege and refusing to play any role in oppression. We are challenged to live our lives with the purest of integrity, so that the way we use our money, the various ways we participate in society and the way we relate to ourselves and others reflect our knowledge of God.

This way of living our faith is not for the immature Christian as it requires various fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–26) and a practiced use of our spiritual gifts (whichever ones we may possess, 1 Corinthians 12:7–11). It is impossible to be mature in our faith and not address the systemic nature of racism (along with the many other *isms*).

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Two parables about “The Third Slave”

Luke 19:11–27

The parable of the ten pounds

“As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. So he said, ‘A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, “Do business with these until I come back.” But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, “We do not want this man to rule over us.” When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, “Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.” He said to him, “Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.” Then the second came, saying, “Lord, your pound has made five pounds.” He said to him, “And you, rule over five cities.” Then the other came, saying, “Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.” He said to him, “I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest.” He said to the bystanders, “Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.” (And they said to him, “Lord, he has ten pounds!”) I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.”

Matthew 25:14–30

The parable of the talents

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Introduction

The above parables are often referred to as the parable of the talents. Commentators on the texts have often compared the stories of a harsh master and his slaves to Jesus as master and his eventual return to earth to see what his “servants” have done in his absence. That is not the understanding of the parable this Bible study will portray.

This study will briefly consider the significance of oral tradition—and the impact that hearing these words had on the original listeners. This study will examine the context in which this parable was told by Jesus, the possible intentions of the master and slaves within the parable and how they were an example then as well as now. And this study will look at the internalization of oppression—for both the oppressed and the oppressors—as it was then and is now. This study can serve as a plumb line for how we anti-racists conduct our lives today.

Oral tradition

Modern scholars, including Richard Q. Ford in his Augsburg Fortress book “The Parables of Jesus: Recovering the Art of Listening,” suggest that the parables of Jesus have multiple meanings. Since many of us have been taught that each parable has one main point, it may not immediately occur to us that what Jesus said had a fuller meaning to those who heard him speak. Ford suggests a parable/listener relationship might have given the parables meanings we may not at first imagine.

There is a Western cultural bias for the written word over the spoken word. Written text is seen as more legitimate than oral tradition. Yet the spoken words of Jesus—particularly in parables—had distinct values as they were heard by the listeners of Jesus’ day.

Modern readers can only imagine the effect Jesus’ words had on his listeners. The parables of Jesus were illustrations of that time.

What did Jesus say? (Ask volunteers to read the Luke and Matthew texts on the previous page.)

The four points on which both versions agree are:

1. There was a master who gave slaves some of his money with instructions to make a profit for the master in his absence.
2. The actions of three slaves are reported: The first and second slaves make money for the master; the third slave makes no money for the master. Instead, he hides the master’s money.
3. The master rewards the two slaves who made him a profit by placing them in charge of “many things.”
4. The master takes from the third slave what that slave had hidden and gives that sum to the first slave—the one who gave the master the greatest profit.

On these points the two texts agree. Now, we will take these elements and place them within the context in which this story was first told. To do this, we will look at the Roman Empire and the Judea of Jesus’ time.

Cultural context

The Roman Empire increased its power and wealth at the expense of the conquered. The orientation of Rome was hierarchical, authoritarian, exploitative and punitive. This parable, Ford suggests, represents three groups in Jesus’ time.

- First, there were the distant Roman overlords, rapacious of their colonies, who masked their greed under a façade of law.
- Second, there were the co-opted Jewish aristocrats, endlessly taxing and otherwise exploiting their fellow Jews. They kept some of the siphoned-off wealth for themselves but surrendered much of it to Rome.
- And finally, there were the hapless, unrecognized, victimized laborers—peasants, artisans, slaves—who were the sole producers for the Empire.

The world in which Jesus spoke, Ford writes, was “one of stable, massive, political and economic inequity.” Jesus was living within “the rationalized subtleties of peaceful, everyday exploitation.” Overtaxing, Ford notes, included the obligatory Temple tax. All this led to the aristocracy’s insidious expropriation of peasant land,” which through “exorbitant loans” and “foreclosures” helped the elites force peasants off their ancestral lands, making them expendable day laborers.

Jesus lived most of his life in tiny Nazareth, but Nazareth was near the larger city of Sepphoris. There is no reason to think Jesus was indifferent to or unaware of the cultural, ethnic and political oppression that existed under Roman rule.

The character of the master

Luke describes the master as being hated by his people. This hatred is claimed by the master without protest, “You knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter?”

Ford describes the master’s actions as revealing the “unexamined confidence of someone entitled to consume without having to imagine the feelings of those compelled to produce.” The master knows the system will support his continued exploitation of the oppressed. He is immune to any social, cultural or political repercussions for his abusive behavior.

Discuss the following questions in small groups or in your large group. Do your best to enter into the parable as it was told within this historical context.

Who would the master represent within the context of Jesus’ time if not the rulers of Rome, the absentee overlords?

Does this parable suddenly have a more urgent application for the listeners of Jesus’ day? Can you see how this story of an abusive, oppressive absentee master would have stirred the hearers of Jesus’ words?

Imagine yourselves as hearers in the time of Jesus. What might have been your response to hearing Jesus speak in this way? (Amazement? Joy? Fear? Wonder?) How would your response be different if you were an aristocratic Jew? A Jew of the peasant or artisan class? A member of Jesus’ family?

Consider this: Rome ruled from afar, setting up puppet rulers who extracted wealth for Rome. To maintain its control, the Roman military used force. The development in first-century Galilee of a market economy substituted cash crops for barter and increased the transfer of wealth from the peasants to the elite. In this way, small farmers and merchants lost their livelihoods while larger, Roman-directed commerce and agriculture grew. There is no doubt that the system of Jesus’ time was corrupt.

The character of the first and second slaves

There are three kinds of slaves in this parable. The first, second and third slaves in this parable represent three ways of living under the rule of this cruel master. We will consider the third slave separately since this slave did not perform as the first two slaves did.

The first and second slaves seem to have learned enough by watching their master, as they are both able to make money within the corrupt system. Can a profit of 100 percent in such an economy be seen as anything but exploitative and abusive? As slaves, they did not gamble their master’s money. They did their best by doing what they knew worked—they mimicked their master’s exploitative example.

Discuss these questions in small groups or in your large group. Do your best to enter into the parable as it was told within this historical context.

Who would the first and second slave represent within the context of Jesus’ time if not the co-opted Jewish aristocrats?

Does this parable suddenly have a more urgent application for the listeners of Jesus' day? How do you think the poor responded to hearing this parable? How do you think they regarded Jesus after hearing him speak in this way?

How do you think the co-opted Jewish aristocrats heard Jesus' words? How would Rome regard his words?

Consider this: As metaphor, *slave* speaks of the surrender not only of personal freedom but of the imagination. We witness *slave as metaphor* in abused women unable to imagine lives without their batterers. Legally, such women within the United States are free agents; but metaphorically, they are slaves. We also witness slave as metaphor when we see adults who were abused as children turn and abuse their own children. With lives so controlled, the eventual surrender of the slave to compliance is not a surprise. On the contrary, those who maintain shreds of their personhood under such complete control by another are those who surprise us.

The first and second slaves' internalized oppression

By the age of 3, a child knows whether she is part of the favored or disfavored population. The ways negative and positive images are communicated are that invasive and that quickly understood. This assignment of either privileged or oppressed is internalized into our image of self long before we get into any classroom, where it is reinforced (Louis Derman-Sparks, Crossroads Ministry video, 1996).

Using slave as metaphor places both oppressed and privileged in positions that stifle the imagination. Both oppressed and privileged are caught within the same corrupt system. Neither oppressed nor privileged can easily imagine a world in which their differences do not exist. The corrupt, unjust system makes both less than God intends.

From your own understanding and in the place where you live, consider this suggestion:

Share images or experiences that suggest the possibilities of a just world. If you were to draw a picture of such a world, what would it look like? If you were to make a collage? A sculpture? How difficult is it to imagine such a world in any detail?

Consider this: Consider the co-opted Jewish aristocrats of Jesus' time—controlled by the brutality of the Roman Empire on one side and their own desire for wealth on the other. They were central to the continued oppression of the peasants, artisans and slaves of ancient Palestine. The co-opted aristocrats who posed as puppet rulers and interpreters provided the necessary cultural reinforcement that guaranteed Rome's continued prosperity. This internalization of the oppressor's role is not unique to ancient Palestine.

The dehumanization of privilege

The dehumanizing nature of privilege is not as studied as the dehumanizing nature of oppression because those who decide what will be studied—the privileged—do not see their privilege as a problem. The study of the oppressed is something for which foundations, corporations and governments provide funding. On the other hand, because privilege is not seen as a problem, studies are not funded, solutions to privilege are not discussed or debated and there are no federal programs designed to relieve White people of the burden of their White privilege.

Blindness, denial and absorption in the system prevent those with privilege from understanding their own captivity. In the parable, the master completely fails to see the irony of his actions. On the one hand, it is as if he would “mentor” his slaves into taking on his role, in which case, the difference in their stations completely escapes him. He appears blind to the contradictions in the act of mentoring oppressed people into being like him—a player in the system.

Is the saying “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” a way of asking the oppressed to emulate the privileged? Why or why not?

In what other ways are the oppressed expected or encouraged to mimic the privileged?

Silently consider how you and people you love have internalized the values of the privileged. Share as you are able and comfortable.

Note: Both oppressed and privileged must internalize the values of the privileged for the system of oppression to prosper and continue.

The reality of the slaves’ station and limitation offers them little recourse but to reproduce the master’s own methods. So, what is rewarded is not (as the master may want to believe) the slaves’ industriousness, ingenuity or even hard work ethic.

Rather, it is the slaves’ ability to replicate the unjust master’s exploitative methods that is rewarded in this parable.

Do you think the slaves might have felt they were proving themselves worthy of their master’s trust? Why or why not?

Why did the master feel confident in entrusting a portion of his wealth to his slaves?

Is this partial analysis of internalized oppression and privilege convincing? Why or why not?

Rome’s internalized privilege

Staying within the context of this parable, we can identify three key features to Rome’s internalized privilege.

- The privileged Roman citizens considered their privilege earned. With their massive armies and wealth of co-opted resources, they had the standing to cleverly forget they stood on stolen ground.
- The privileged Roman citizens considered themselves favored by their gods. Rome viewed herself as the only suitable guardian of civilization. In other words, abundance patterns had become part of Rome’s culture.

- The privileged Roman citizens believed their own propaganda. Rome knew how to manufacture truth for itself and those it conquered. All saw Rome's continued growth and exploitation as unavoidable.

Consider this: Let us recall that Rome was a society of great pomp and circumstance. It gloried in the trappings of great wealth. Excess was a necessity for ancient Rome.

Like the master of the parable who took for granted the power of the system to mentor slaves into mimicking his abusive behavior, Rome thought nothing of posting Jewish aristocrats in positions of little power so that its own (Rome's) power might be greatly increased.

Would you consider it offensive if the United States were likened to ancient Rome? Being as specific as you can, relating your reasoning to the co-opted Jewish aristocrats and the Jews of the masses, explain why this comparison would or would not be offensive to you.

Israel's internalized oppression

Taking another look at the co-opted aristocrats, let's look at the key features of Israel's internalized oppression:

- The co-opted Jewish aristocrats needed to believe they were better than the Jews of the masses. They produced this distinction by adopting Roman manners, dress and customs.
- The co-opted Jewish aristocrats believed those less fortunate than themselves to be judged if not forsaken by God. The established religious leaders had no problem explaining oppression as chastisement from God.
- The co-opted Jewish aristocrats lived in extreme anxiety and fear that they would be reduced to the slave status of the majority of Israel. It was possible to suddenly find themselves treated like a "regular" Jew.

Consider this: Could the co-opted Jewish aristocrats and both the first and second slaves have seen their emulation of their unjust master as a way to improve their standing and alleviate their own suffering? Perhaps some small favor, some sweet reward, would be the result of their surrender to the system?

It was easy to replicate the exploitative conduct of their master in a marketplace that expected such exploitation. Only a thirst for justice would have compelled them to do otherwise.

The co-opted Jewish aristocrats ensured and improved their standing through cooperation and collaboration with Rome. They did this through a complicity that further disfavored their own people but which provided them some measure of relief, some favor and a few of the trappings of privilege.

What are some obstacles or indicators (institutional and systemic) that reveal people are caught in a system?

What are the traits of a person who is caught in such a system? How would such a person live? What kinds of things would such a person believe and teach?

Going deeper into oppression

What was the result for these two slaves? Each successful slave was given greater responsibility to serve the wealthy system's successful operation. There were degrees of success in emulating their privileged master. The first slave earned the greatest profit for his master. The second slave was not quite as successful, but was still rewarded by the master.

Living beyond our means is epidemic in the United States. What do you think drives people to aspire to an appearance of wealth?

Like the first and second slaves, those who seek to emulate those of wealth and privilege in the United States meet with varying degrees of success. What do you think causes these differences? How important is the appearance of wealth in today's society?

White baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) will “inherit between \$7-10 trillion in assets from their parents and grandparents, property handed down by those who were able to accumulate assets that people of color could not” (“Whites Swim in Racial Preference” by Tim Wise, AlterNet, Feb. 19, 2003, <http://bit.ly/1RRbvGX>). Can you name some ways a person with inheritance was given an advantage over a person who has to start from scratch?

Looking at the third slave

There is no similarity between the third slave's actions and the actions of the first two slaves. The contrast is stark. Because of the two slaves' actions, the third slave's actions stick out like the proverbial sore thumb.

The third slave doesn't appear to even try to respond to the master's directive. The traditional explanation of the third slave's inaction is that this slave is stupid and lazy, but with our new way of looking at

this parable, the third slave's actions invite further exploration.

So we will now consider some traditional understandings and explore a new possibility for the third slave's actions. Along the way, we will note how these traditional observations about the third slave are not unlike judgments made about oppressed people in our society and world today.

Stupid and lazy

Was the third slave stupid or lazy?

It is not hard to imagine this is exactly how the master wanted to view this third slave of his. It would have been a small thing—in the master's eyes—for this third slave to have at least placed his money in a bank. If not laziness, what would explain this slave's failure to have his master's money at least draw a little interest?

The cultural biases we are all taught through such children's fables as “The Ant and the Grasshopper” (<http://bit.ly/1QLoV5T>) clearly tell us that those who refuse to work do not eat. A certain self-righteousness develops within those who are able to gather, to work. After all, God helps those who help themselves, right?

- Share with each other the ways you've heard such sentiments expressed about people who are poor.
- Share stories of yourself or people you know who have experienced poverty that was not related to laziness or stupidity. How do these stories influence your perspective of people living in poverty?
- Jesus told Judas the poor would always be with him. How did Jesus know this would be true?

The only way we can conclude that this third slave is lazy is if we forget all that we know about slaves and masters. In reality, *lazy* is impossible for a slave. Slaves by definition must perform to their master's standards and are punished if they fail.

Poverty is uncomfortable; no one would choose it as a lifestyle. Yet how often are people living in poverty judged too lazy to work?

Stupidity could be blamed if it weren't for the slave's words. Listen to the third slave and see that he does not speak in any way to encourage this conclusion.

"Then the other came, saying, 'Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow'" (Luke 19:20-21).

"Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours'" (Mathew 24:24-25).

The third slave's words do not encourage us to think he was stupid.

Paralyzed by fear

A more sympathetic explanation for this third slave's action is that he was paralyzed by fear. The third slave even names fear. Is it possible that this third slave was too afraid to act?

Like the idea of perceiving this slave as stupid, what makes this explanation of abject fear difficult to embrace are his words. Granted, this slave says, "I was afraid," but there is nothing but these three words among so many others. Neither his actions nor the rest of the third slave's bold words convey fear.

"Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow."

"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

The third slave boldly faces the master, describing him as a "harsh man." These are not words that suggest fearful paralysis. So what could be the third slave's intention? Why did this third slave refuse to attempt to enrich the master?

Completely ethical

There is a third possibility, which only comes to the forefront when we keep in mind the historical context of this parable and welcome Ford's suggestion that the parables of Jesus have more than one true meaning.

What if the third slave refuses to make his master any money because of a belief that the current oppressive system is unjust and deserves rejection? Could this third slave possess integrity and seek to behave in an ethical manner? Is it possible for a person to choose to live a life that does not willingly support an oppressive system? Did Jesus use this third slave as an illustration of one who resists the corruption of an unjust system, a system that would require the exploitation of others?

Listening to the third slave

Listening to the third slave, we might hear his inactivity as a response. Listen to the third slave, and we will hear a person take moral authority through passivity. It is an amazing exercise in self-determination, one that is certainly bold and unexpected, considering the slave's opportunities.

We are challenged if we listen to the third slave as racial justice advocates. Such advocates recognize that we live within a racist system with both structural and internalized racism that provides racial preference or privilege for Whites while denying access to true institutional and systemic power to people of color. Listening to the third slave makes

us wonder how it is possible to maintain enough presence of self to be able to resist the temptations to self-advancement, quick profit and praise offered by the masters of an unjust system.

Within our own day-to-day lives, the questions the third slave's actions provide us are daunting. Either in small groups (with or without a report-out) or in the larger group, share your responses to the following questions:

How can we resist being co-opted by structural and internalized racism?

What kinds of opportunities come our way to live as racial justice advocates who resist supporting the racist system that surrounds us?

How can we maintain within ourselves enough fortitude, discernment and faith to act so boldly upon our faith?

Consider this: Jesus sets this third slave within a parable that shows successful resistance in isolation. As anti-racists we all work to some degree in isolation. We may be the only one in our family or workplace striving against racism. We can find ourselves being the only voice at unit or synodical meetings asking for greater education in the area of anti-racism.

As a healthy response to this isolation, we need to form alliances with other anti-racists, read and discuss the books on the anti-racist bibliography on our racial justice and advocacy web page and keep our desire to be anti-racists as a matter of continuous prayer. We need to pray for other racial justice advocates, knowing that they are also working in isolation.

Anti-racists know when something is amiss even if our analysis is sometimes a little foggy. Speaking of anti-racism can be like speaking another language. Successful communication does not always happen.

But how we verbalize our message isn't the only barrier to communication. Sometimes others put up a wall to keep from hearing our words because our words require a response. Entrenched White privilege can refuse to allow the suffering and racial realities of people of color to have any impact on that White privilege. There simply is not the joyful reception of the challenging anti-racist understanding of the gospel that there is for the comfortable view of the gospel as God's affection and favor for God's people. The anti-racist gospel is one of mutual accountability, racial equity, resistance to evil and care for neighbors.

In what ways can the anti-racist gospel be made more comfortable? At what point does being comfortable limit our possibilities for becoming anti-racist?

How has anti-racism education enlightened your understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

In what new ways can anti-racism education be promoted? How can you help?

Our roles at birth

One of the underlying assumptions Women of the ELCA has held from the start of our anti-racism education is that at birth, we are assigned the role of oppressor or oppressed. We have no choice; the system cast us in these roles generations ago. It is not our fault that we are cast within this system. Our struggle as anti-racists is to resist these assigned roles.

As people aware of systemic and institutional racism, anti-racists are faced with real choices about how we live our lives, conduct our business and communicate our intentions to others. If our understanding of racism is completely private, that is, we have some knowledge but have not made the conscious decision to have that knowledge change us, there is likely no way for anyone to know where we stand.

In other words, without such a decision, our daily life says nothing to anyone about what we know about racism. In truth, if we live that way, we cannot describe ourselves as anti-racist or racial justice advocates. We are simply people who have had a little anti-racism education living out our assigned roles without advocating for change.

If, however, our knowledge of racism has awakened within our bellies a hunger for the gospel of reconciliation, racial equity and healing, this will drive us to find ways to live as racial justice advocates. If our knowledge becomes wisdom, we will eventually find ourselves as anti-racists in opposition to those who have mastered their roles within the oppressive system, whether oppressors or oppressed. Each time we are faced with choices like those of the slaves in this parable, we prayerfully seek the intention and action that will reflect our anti-racist faith. And, as the third slave in this parable reveals, effective resistance is possible.

Discuss these questions either in small groups with a report-out or in the larger group. You may wish to record these responses, as they can provide ideas for your own lives.

Share stories of people who have chosen not to participate in continuing injustice. From where do you think they get their strength?

How have you sent a clear message of your intent to live for justice as an anti-racist? Share a time when you resisted participation in structural racism and it sent a clear message of your intent to live for justice as an anti-racist.

Share experiences you have had where you made the choice of resistance. What made this choice difficult? What made this choice necessary?

Internalized integrity

Listening to the third slave, we hear a person who had as many reasons as we have to simply let things be. This third slave could have simply taken the master's money to the bank so his money would have earned interest. But the slave stands as an example of someone who refused to compromise with evil even though it cost him.

Like a White anti-racist who refuses to play the role of gatekeeper or little enforcer, the third slave refused to play the role of exploiter. Like an anti-racist of color who refuses to be bought with small personal favors while other people of color suffer around her, this third slave refuses to be diminished by complicity.

Select at least two of the following examples to discuss in small groups. Can you see this happening in today's world? Share your ideas of anti-racist responses.

- A well-intentioned White woman learns that her company has had a rash of racial discrimination suits that have been quietly settled with cash payments to the complainants. At the same time, her employer calls a halt to diversity education. Does she say anything?
- A Mexican American woman begins a job in human resources and realizes that 60 percent of the work complaints received have been in the area of racial relations. The CEO asks her whether or not there truly are racial tensions in the workplace. How does she answer?
- While you are driving home on the freeway, you see four White police officers holding an African American man down on the ground. Do you pull over to be a silent witness? Why or why not? Does this question open up new possibilities of living as an anti-racist?

Internalization and conformity

Speaking out is a bold act, and it is a key form of resistance. Often, we are not directly involved in scenarios such as the ones above, but we can voice our feelings about things we hear about. Such occurrences can be the basis for discussion and analysis. Discussion and analysis strengthen our commitment to Women of the ELCA's desire to have an anti-racist identity.

The cultural devices designed to make us conform are many. We may not see ourselves as capable of original and creative resistance because we have been taught that we are insignificant. We are told that we are just a "cog in the wheel," "the little guy," "mouse in the maze," "working stiff," "one little fish in the sea," and "one bleep on the screen." We live our lives by "humping along," "working in the salt mines," with our "nose to the grindstone," running endlessly without getting anywhere like "hamsters on

treadmills." We call it all one big "rat race."

We are taught to "trust the experts," "keep our noses clean," "mind our own business," and "keep our heads down so we don't catch a stray bullet." We know we shouldn't "rock the boat," "make waves," or "borrow trouble." We are all on a "need-to-know basis," and we mustn't "make mountains out of molehills."

As women, we don't want to be labeled as "angry" or "aggressive" because these are not seen as feminine virtues. We have been taught to be "nice," "good girls," and, above all, "ladies."

Pleas for cultural conformity surround us. And even when the starkest injustice presents itself, we turn away feeling powerless, uninformed and not qualified to ask hard questions or even offer compassionate relief. (Most of our compassionate relief goes to strangers.) We have internalized all the structural racist messages; we have learned our lessons well. As a result, we may not see that effective resistance is possible. We fold our hands in prayer and resignation, blinding ourselves to the human suffering that surrounds us. Until we listen to the third slave.

Share in small groups with a report-out to the larger group the following questions:

Share stories of attempts that have been made to keep women silent in your family, church or community.

What early teachings did you receive about being a "nice girl" that continue to be a struggle for you today? Can you brainstorm some possibilities for resisting these teachings?

Share your experiences with and about women who have been called too bold, too outspoken and too unladylike.

If you are so bold, share a time when you were silent in the face of human injustice. What kept you from acting? How do you wish you had responded?

Conclude with hope

We can find hope in the third slave's example even as we wonder about what this third slave intended. What was so important to this third slave that it made punishment inconsequential? What did the third slave hope to accomplish?

After a time, practicing anti-racists learn that the task is huge and the lack of apparent progress is discouraging. We learn that living as racial justice advocates changes us, and sometimes the changes we are asked to make are difficult. What helps us continue is an inner conviction that we might share with this third slave: that God expects us to live justly and that living non-violently is morally right.

Empty prayers for peace and justice cannot assuage such a God when there is no accompanying action. And the moral authority that living non-violently brings cannot be bought or captured by any other means than living with integrity. But even these are not the only basis for the hope that compels anti-racists.

Our hope is that it matters. We hope that the way we live as anti-racists matters to other people, to the world and to our God. We hope that we may capture glimpses of God's creation as God intended—in wholeness and in diversity. We hope that if enough of us respond to this call to live justly and seek racial equity, things can change. It was humanity that set injustice into place; humanity can remove it. We hope God in us can make these changes; we expect God in us to show us how. By God's amazing grace, we will continue to imperfectly try.

Use a closing prayer of your own choosing.