An Unjust Economy
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Year A, 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 | Matthew 25:14–30
15 November 2026

We often talk about the economy in terms of growth. We celebrate when the economy expands, when businesses make bigger profits, when the stock market rises, and when the wealthy become wealthier. Growth is generally treated as a good thing, and the accumulation of wealth as something to aspire to. But that picture looks rather different depending on where you stand.

Here in Aotearoa, many households are feeling the pressure of rising living costs. Groceries, electricity, rates and housing continue to take up an increasingly large share of people's incomes. Stats NZ recently reported that living costs for the lowest-spending fifth of households had risen by 3.6 per cent over the year, compared with 2.5 per cent for the highest-spending fifth. At the same time, the wealth at the very top continues to grow. The 2026 NBR Rich List recorded 26 billionaires in New Zealand, with a combined wealth of $129 billion, up from $102.1 billion the previous year. These figures don't tell the whole story, of course. But they do invite us to ask some questions about the way our economy works, who benefits from it, and who carries the cost. And perhaps those are questions worth bringing to today's Gospel reading.

The parable of the talents is one we often hear as a story about making the most of what we have been given. We are encouraged to use our gifts, take risks, be productive, and not bury our talents in the ground. The first two workers are praised for doubling what they were given, while the third is condemned for doing nothing with his share. It is a familiar interpretation, and it can

be a useful one. But there is another way of reading this story, one that asks us to look more closely at the landowner, and at the kind of economy in which these workers are operating. A talent was not a small amount of money. It was an enormous sum, worth roughly fifteen years of wages for an ordinary worker. So this is not a story about someone being given a few coins and asked to make something of them. The landowner is entrusting vast wealth to these workers. And what does he expect them to do with it? To make more.

We might assume that the first two workers have simply been clever and hardworking. But how exactly have they doubled the money? What kind of economic activity produces that sort of return? And who might have paid the price? The biblical world was one in which wealthy landowners could accumulate more and more through lending, debt and the dispossession of poorer families. Wealth was not always created through hard work or ingenuity. It could be built through systems that left others with less. This is the possibility explored by biblical scholars Ched Myers and Eric DeBode. They suggest that perhaps this is not simply a parable praising the first two workers for their success. Perhaps Jesus is exposing the workings of an exploitative economic system, and inviting us to pay attention to the worker who refuses to take part. Because the third worker does something quite different. He buries the money. And when the landowner returns, he tells him why. “Knowing your ruthlessness” he says, “you who reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter”

It is a remarkable accusation. The worker names the landowner as someone who takes what he has not earned, who profits from the labour and vulnerability of others. And the landowner does not actually dispute the accusation. Instead, he turns it back on the worker, condemning him for failing to make money. Perhaps the third worker is not lazy or foolish. Perhaps he is a whistleblower. Someone who sees what is happening, names it, and refuses to participate. And that brings us back to the world we inhabit.

We know what it is to live within economic systems that can reward accumulation while making life harder for others. We see it

in the housing market, where rising property values can be celebrated as financial success while making secure housing increasingly out of reach. We see it when the cost of basic necessities rises, while the profits of some businesses continue to grow. We see it when people are told to budget better, work harder or make better choices, while the structural pressures shaping their lives go largely unchallenged. What happens when the system itself is working very well for some people, precisely because it isn't working for others?

Perhaps that is exactly what the third worker is beginning to recognise. He looks at the landowner and names what the others have left unsaid: “Knowing your ruthlessness you who reap where you did not sow and gather where you did not scatter.” He sees the injustice at the heart of the arrangement. And he refuses to participate in it. He doesn't try to make the landowner more money. He doesn't find a cleverer way to work within the system. He buries the money, taking it out of circulation. And when the landowner returns, he tells him exactly why. It is a risky thing to do. The worker knows what his landowner is capable of. And the consequences are severe. He is cast out, into the darkness, while the other workers are rewarded.

But perhaps we have been too quick to assume that this is a story about a worker who failed. Perhaps he is the only one who has truly understood what is happening. His refusal exposes the landowner's wealth for what it is, and challenges the idea that accumulating more is always something to celebrate. And this reading sits interestingly alongside what comes next in Matthew's Gospel. In the very next passage, Jesus speaks of the final judgement, and of finding him among those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, sick and imprisoned. Christ is identified not with the powerful and wealthy, but with those who are pushed to the margins.

So perhaps the third worker's place in the darkness is not quite the failure we have assumed it to be. Perhaps, in refusing to participate in his landowner's exploitation, he has found himself closer to the people among whom Christ tells us he will be found. The third worker does not change the system. He does not overthrow his landowner or escape the consequences of challenging him. But he does refuse to help it succeed. He refuses to turn someone else's loss

into his landowner's profit. And he refuses to pretend that this is simply how the world works.

Perhaps that is where this parable speaks to us. Not in the suggestion that we can stand outside every unjust system, or that we can somehow keep our lives free from compromise. But in the reminder that we are not powerless to choose how we participate. We can question what is presented to us as inevitable. We can refuse to defend what we know causes harm. We can choose not to measure faithfulness by the standards of wealth, power and success. The landowner calls the worker worthless. But Matthew's Gospel has already given us another measure of worth: the way we treat those who are hungry, excluded and overlooked. Perhaps the courage to say no begins there: in deciding whose judgement matters, whose interests we serve, and whose lives we are willing to stand alongside.