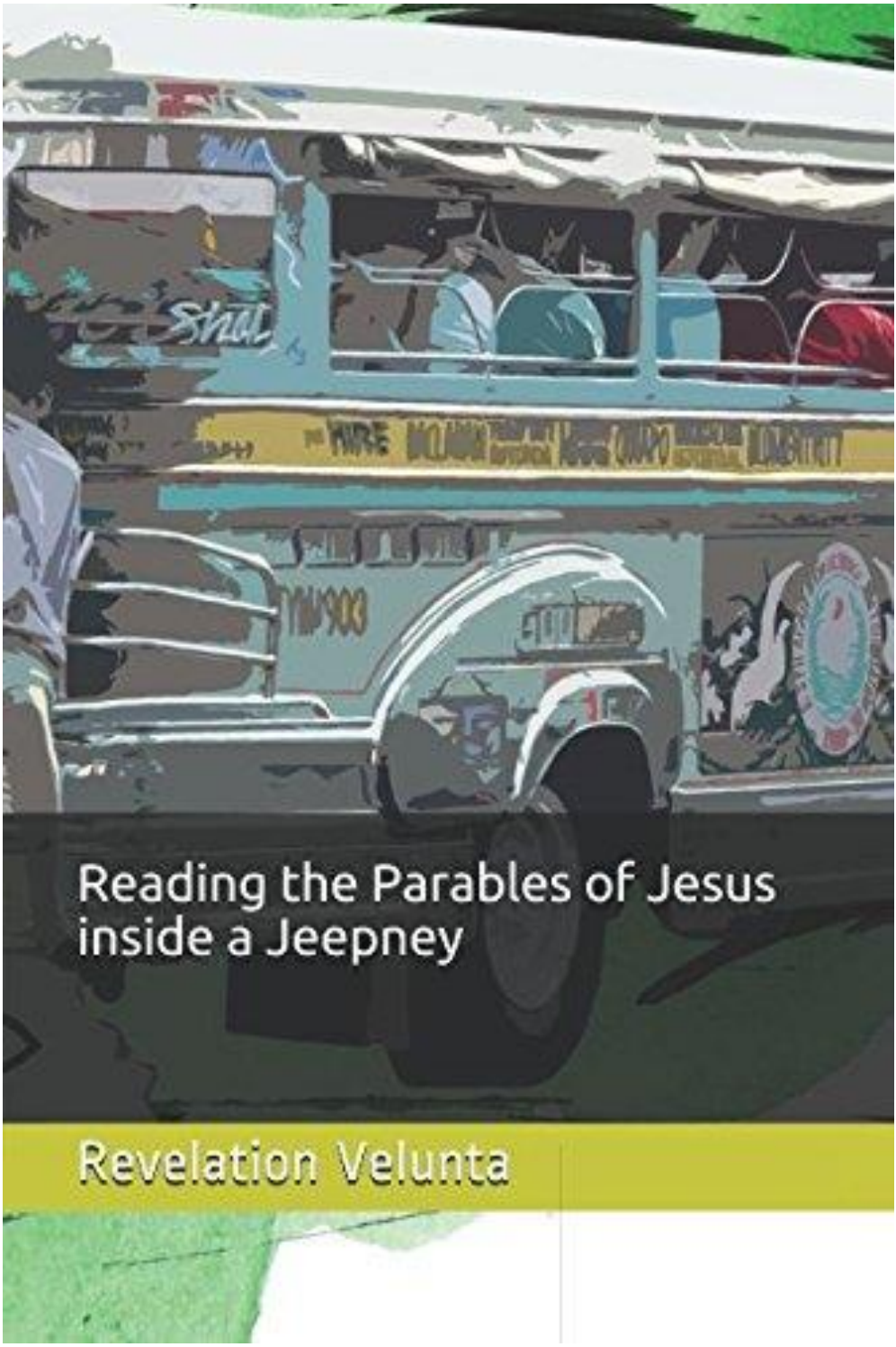

Reading the Parables of Jesus inside a Jeepney

Revelation Velunta

GOOD NEWS FOR THE 70%...

If you've ever driven down the entire length of Aurora Blvd in Cubao (or any regular in-city route, for that matter), you would know how Jeepneys bring a whole new meaning to the word "disruptive." They snake through traffic at full throttle and screech to a full stop all while incessantly honking, cutting corners, and negotiating with passengers to scoot over and make room, so more passengers can board.

Most private car owners (me included) will find jeepneys annoyingly frustrating. I am a church-worker, see, and I try to keep my cussing at a level minimum, but when I am sharing the road with jeepney drivers, all bets are off. I scream, and all hell breaks loose from my mouth.

The object of irritation would be the Jeepney and its driver. The apparent lack of consideration for law-abiding motorists like me; the blatant disregard for traffic rules; and the thorough abandonment of all good manners and right conduct on the road. So it seems.

You see, jeepneys ferry tired day-laborers, students, public school teachers, *taho* vendors, rank-and-file employees, fast food servers, strangers, and friends back to their homes after a very long day. The Jeepney (and its counterpart, the tricycle) is the only reliable means of transport in almost all major thoroughfares in the metro. Jeepney drivers are your salvation when it's monsoon season when you need to get from one end of the street to the other for just 8 Pesos.

When you experience the jeepney by virtue of your road encounter from your airconditioned car with cherry bubble gum freshener and Bruno Mars on spotify, you will most likely hate jeepneys for everything that they are—annoying, frustrating, disrupting. But if you experience the jeepney as your everyday mode of transport, the rest of the bourgeois world is just one huge shitpile of things and people that make your life more difficult than it already is.

Revelation Velunta's Jeepney Hermeneutics brings to the fore this contrast of locations. It surfaces a reading that, when done from inside a jeepney, could

breathe a whole new truth into the text—any text—but more profoundly the Parables attributed to Jesus of Nazareth.

In the era of allegory and standard interpretations and proper driving conduct and road manners, Velunta's *Jeepney Hermeneutics* is a necessary disruption to the ways in which we, as "faithful" Bible readers and "law-abiding" motorists capable of doing no wrong, conduct and view ourselves.

Reading the Parables of Jesus inside a Jeepney is good news for everyone in the jeepney which is roughly 70% of the general population in the Philippines. It is bad news for those in the remaining 25% and an absolute horror story for those in the uppermost 5%.

And if truth is a matter of statistics, the truth that is preached by Velunta, is indeed truest. Those who would feel insulted by these truths will realize, by the end of this book, that they are exactly that which is wrong in this world and they should—quite honestly—repent before a Jeepney runs them over.

Pastor Kakay Pamaran
Union Theological Seminary

ESPECIALLY FOR MILLENIALS…

Jesus taught through parables. His audience was an oral society who remembered his stories. Today's listeners of parables are actually readers and texters. There is a wide gap between the original audience and today's audiences. The images, symbols, and nuances need to be reclaimed. Velunta's work helps in digging and uncovering meanings for Jesus's parables for today. His jeepney hermeneutics is relevant to Filipino audiences, especially the Millenials.

Prof. Arche Ligo
Institute for Women's Studies
Institute of Formation and Religious Studies

GOOD NEWS, PIECE BY PIECE…

It's a meeting of horizons – mine and those of the Parables – with Reeve the curtain-raiser to let us enjoy the blessings of reading again to life our favorite little Bible stories!

Concise and powerfully creative that they leave us imagining possibilities for the now, the readings bring the delectable 'good news' that the Bible bears - piece by piece. Now I enjoy reading the parables (or my Bible), and how I am thriving better!

Because those ancient and out-of-my-world stories by Jesus make more sense to me and summons life to flourish some more for me and my world.

Praise Goddess for these readings!

Dr. Liza Lamis
Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches

BREAKTHROUGH RE-READING OF THE PARABLES…

The Parables of Jesus are the most diversely interpreted biblical stories. Most interpretations always identify the kings, fathers, landowners, and masters in the parables with God and the stories as about the realization of God's reign. In return, many hearers find it difficult to relate with a God who is unjust, mad, unkind, and angry in the stories.

But Revelation Velunta's reading of the parables makes them easier to comprehend, to connect to, and to identify with. The hearers can easily relate. Bringing the TEXT into the CONTEXT is not just a skill, but it requires an in-depth understanding of biblical texts which are relevant to the daily lives of the hearers especially those who experience the brunt of society's unbalanced development. The author is not just a theologian but a sincere and profound teacher who invites the people especially from the periphery to really grip the message and to identify themselves with the path Jesus took. It is a breakthrough re-reading of the parables which persuasively connects the 2,000 years gap to the present. It is indeed a blessing!

Rev. Erahvilla Maga-Cabilla
Iglesia Filipina Independiente

READING
THE PARABLES OF JESUS
INSIDE A JEEPNEY

REVELATION VELUNTA

READING THE PARABELS OF JESUS INSIDE A JEEPNEY

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FOREWORD

It has been said that the parables are earthy stories about heavy things. What is usually not said is that these parables were *not* meant for modern audiences—namely, you and me. They were meant for the poor and subjugated who lived under Pax Romana. Indeed, they had to deal with very heavy things. Landlessness, starvation, displacement, exploitation, disease… familiar things to both the poor of today, and to those of us who care about the poor.

With that in mind, allow Tatay to show you how these parables were most probably interpreted by Jesus's intended audience—not as metaphors for heavenly things, but as brutally honest unmasking, subversions, and deconstructions of imperial rule.

Fair warning though. Looking at the parables in this light is bound to deconstruct the foundations of one's faith. Especially the faith that is so used to interpreting the rich, the landed, and the king in the parables as metaphors for God. And that is okay. One cannot reconstruct without tearing down first. Hopefully, we can reconstruct our faith with a much stronger foundation—namely, the knowledge that Jesus was truly on the side of the poor and oppressed, and that Jesus is on Earth. And both are true to this day.

Why do we always seek out the presence of God? The best way to find Immanuel is to *be* Immanuel. Are we prepared to walk alongside Lumads, PLHIV's, displaced and dispossessed farmers and fisherfolk, LGBT's, and every other oppressed sector in our country? In our world? Can we be Immanuel for them and can we let them be Immanuel for us?

Well, we won't know until we try. And I daresay this book can help as a starting point for us to try.

IAN YESHUA AOANAN VELUNTA

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people contributed to this book.

Among them would be everyone who has visited the home of jeepney hermeneutics online (https://jeepney.blogspot.com) for the past 13 years.

Among them would be God's greatest gifts to the seminary: seminarians, staff, and faculty whom I 've had the privilege of learning and working with for the past fifteen years.

Among them also would be the staff and volunteers of the NCCP and the participants of the Basic Ecumenical Course, the Bible-in-Context Seminar, and the Summer Internship Program. I'm been richly blessed with their partnership for the past twelve years.

Among them would be family, friends, comrades, and colleagues, here and abroad, who have helped me shape jeepney hermeneutics for the past twenty-one years.

Finally, among them would be Arche, Carola, Erah, Kakay, Jin Young, Liza, and Norma who read the material and wrote heartwarming commendations; ZM who did the beautiful cover design; and Ian, who has been reading and editing my work for the past several years, who wrote the foreword.

This book is dedicated to the 70 percent who ride jeepneys.

INVITATION…

Reading the Parables of Jesus inside a Jeepney is a provocative invitation from Revelation Velunta.

The author has developed the capacity to find parallels between the biblical context and the present time. He has made a clear option for the poor and oppressed which is also the locus of Jesus in the Gospels.

Revelation has developed a unique pedagogical technique, by allowing Jesus's teaching via parables to resonate in the daily experiences of common people like you, like me, like those who travel every day in a crowdy, crazy Jeepney to go to work, to study…

Only those who live, walk, listen, eat, and struggle with the oppressed can develop these parallels that you will find through the reading in this book. It is a radical encounter with the biblical text from the need to overcome oppression.

Those who have experienced similar situations, those who have had the experience of traveling in a crowded Jeepney will find hope and solidarity on the way to genuine transformation and fullness of life for all.

Carola Tron
Iglesia Evangelica Valdense

HAVE A SAFE TRIP!

Parables are interesting popular stories. They are riddles made known to those who have ears to listen. There are no hidden meanings. Those who thirst and long for liberation from structural injustice and cultural domination must have enjoyed the parables of Jesus.

Maybe that was a reason why Jesus was well loved. Not only did he tell stories from ordinary experiences but shared extraordinary, destabilizing, radical thoughts against the status quo and the accepted norms in the mold of empire (woman and the unjust judge, the sower, the shepherd who sought one sheep, wedding banquet, etc.) through parables. Prof Reeve, relived and animated the parables as if establishing a dialogue between Jesus's time and

our time. He makes us re-read the parables; invites us to reflect from the perspective and vantage point of jeepney riders; from the ordinary ones who keep their faith that they will reach their destination however dangerous the road might be.

Reading through these parables retold and interpreted will make you cry, will make you laugh, will make you say "Aha!" and "hmmmm," will break and unbreak your heart, and will make you say AMEN or "so help me God."

Have a safe and interesting trip in reading Jesus's Parables inside a jeepney.

Deaconess Norma Dollaga
a jeepney rider

INTRODUCTION

I had the privilege of learning with two Jewish professors in graduate school. I learned a lot from them and I want to share some of these learnings with you. One was a rabbi and he told me that parables had seventy interpretations. Yes, he means exactly what you think he meant. Since no two of anything are exactly the same, then no two interpretations are exactly the same. Context plays a very important role in interpreting any text. A Roman Catholic and a Protestant interpreting a letter from Martin Luther will present two very different interpretations.

My other professor, a New Testament scholar, (yes, you can be a Jew and teach New Testament) taught me that parables had only one point. And they, more often than not, had no deeper, mysterious meaning. The use of allegory was a Christian reading method that was based on Greek dualism. There was always a literal (material) and allegorical (spiritual) meanings to parables.

Since Jesus was a rabbi, he spoke in parables. In Aramaic. Mostly to common folk. In the market place. By the seashore. Along dirt roads near fields of grain. When he spoke of Samaritans he spoke of Samaritans during his time, 2000 years ago. Hated. Discriminated. Bastards. When we speak of Samaritans today. We speak of the good guy. We have hospitals, churches, and multi-purpose credit cooperatives named after him.

Using the hard work of Historical Jesus researchers, social scientists, archeologists, and the wealth of related disciplines, I have attempted to look for resonance. Actually, echoes. Do Jesus's parables still resonate with the struggles and the plight of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed in our context today? The way they did among the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed of his day? Can we still hear echoes from the past?

Lest we forget. Jesus was executed by Rome for being an enemy of the state. His parables were one of the reasons for his crucifixion. Parables can get one killed.

FROM JEEPS TO JEEPNEYS

On July 7, 1940, the US Army requested the War Department for an all-terrain reconnaissance, go-anywhere vehicle that seated three and had a mount for a 30-caliber machine gun. Tens of thousands of these vehicles were used in World War II. The jeep has been called "America's greatest contribution to modern warfare."

For many Filipinos the jeep was and, with the continuing presence of American troops in the islands, still is an imperializing "text." The jeepney, the Philippines' most popular mode of mass transportation, resists this "text."

A jeep becomes a jeepney when it ceases to serve its original purpose and is transformed into something else, like beating swords into

ploughshares. Jeepneys are unexpected readings of a jeep. Filipinos did at least three things to the military jeep: they removed the weapons and their mounts, increased its limited seating capacity from three to over twenty passengers (and in many cases, including animals), and transformed the military vehicle into a “Filipino home on wheels.”

If the Filipino jeepney is a “resistant reading” of the U.S. military jeep, then jeepney hermeneutics is a "resistant reading" of the Bible.

Biblical Studies is one area that remains a stronghold of colonial scholarship, especially among Protestant Churches. Many Filipino social scientists call this collective condition of the Filipino psyche as colonial mentality. Historian Renato Constantino traces it to the systematic miseducation of the Filipinos. Eleazar Fernandez argues that the Philippines can be called a "mental colony" of the United States of America.

Fr. Carlos Abesamis, SJ, had argued that nothing is the matter with foreigners doing foreign theology (for themselves). The issue is that Filipino theology is a photocopy of Euro-American theology.

Jeepney hermeneutics challenges this colonial mentality in biblical studies by drawing on the Filipinos' legacy of resistance. From mortar shells to church bells, from implements of death to instruments of music, from jeeps to jeepneys, Filipinos have turned weapons of mass destruction to symbols of mass celebration. The colonization of biblical studies, especially in the field of hermeneutics, among Protestant communities in the Philippines requires no special pleading.

Thus, there is the need for decolonizing hermeneutics. Jeepney hermeneutics acknowledges the depth and the breadth of meanings represented by the Filipino Jeepney as symbolic of a people's capacity to beat swords into ploughshares.

In simple terms, this book is about bringing Jesus's parables out of a US military jeep and bringing them into a Filipino jeepney.

LET US BEGIN!

Revelation E. Velunta
14 November 2017

1. THE TWO DEBTORS

Luke 7:41 "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?"

Most of us know what debts and mounting debts do to people. Whether we are talking about those who need to borrow their most basic needs, like rice and dried fish, from the village sari-sari store or the millions in our country whose livelihood depends on the 5-6 lending system, debts impoverish and dehumanize people.

And empire thrives on debt. Then and now. Thus, it should not surprise us when the Jubilee (Leviticus 25) and Jesus's Prayer (Matthew 6 and Luke 11) both demand debt cancellation.

The Parable of the Two Debtors paints a picture of the situation of the majority in first century Palestine. The denarius represented subsistence wage. The amount enough for one person to survive for one day. One owed 500 denarii. That's bread barely enough to last a year and a half. Longer if one bought barley. The other owed 50, bread barely enough to last two months.

Both debts were cancelled. This is good news to the poor!

For people who live from one day to the next, then and now, the prayer has not changed: "give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts."

2. THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Luke 18: 10 "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Pharisees loved God and country, were very religious, highly trained, upright, (remember that Paul was a Pharisee), and totally against Roman Occupation.

In the parable, he was telling the truth. Everything he said in his prayer was true.

Tax collectors were probably the most hated people during Jesus's time. They worked for Rome and were considered collaborators and traitors.

In the parable, everything he said in his prayer was also true.

Both men were truthful. What's the difference?

The tax collector judged himself and found himself needing God's mercy. The pharisee judged the tax collector and found the tax collector needing God's mercy.

Then and now, we all need God's mercy.

3. THE NET

Matthew 13: 47 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48 when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad."

Farmers and fisher-folk made up the majority of the poor during Jesus's time. Nothing has changed.

When Jesus called his first disciples, who were all fisher-folk, they were mending their nets.

Why? Because life was tough for regular fisher-folk under Roman Occupation. There were taxes on nets, taxes on boats, taxes on almost everything. Common folk had to shell out up to 55 percent of their income on taxes and tithes. And there were the huge trawlers. Nothing has really changed.

Fisher-folk know what drag nets do. You bring in everything the net catches to the shore. And you separate the catch. What can be eaten, what can be sold, what needs to be thrown back into the sea.

With practically no fish to catch, Jesus challenged them to be fishers of people. Fisher-folk know how to separate the catch. We have much to learn from them.

4. THE LABORERS IN THE VINEYARD

Matthew 20: 1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace;
4 and he said to them, "You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. 5 When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same.
6 And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, "Why are you standing here idle all day?' 7 They said to him, "Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, "You also go into the vineyard.' 8When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, "Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' 9 When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. 10 Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. 11 And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' 13 But he replied to one of them, "Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. 15 Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

Why do we always identify the rich landowner with God? Why do we call his actions acts of benevolence and grace? Why do we always take the side of the rich and the powerful?

And worse, why do we demonize the grumbling day laborers?

A denarius was subsistence wage. It could buy a measure of wheat. One day's worth for one person. Or three measures of barley, enough for three people for one day. Just bread. Nothing else.

During Jesus’s time, half of the population was slowly starving to death. During Jesus’s time 15% of the population were day laborers. They survived from one day to the next.

The Parable is not about God or God's grace. It's about the rich's greed. It's about divide and conquer. It's about taking advantage of those whose only hope is God. It's about the Consunjis, Cojuangcos, Sys, Tans, Gokongweis, and Ayalas of Jesus's time.

It's about the Gospel of the Rich.

5. THE YEAST

Matthew 13: 33 "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

When we were very young, my siblings, cousins, and I enjoyed going to the bakery. (Actually I still do.) We would go very early in the mornings to watch the bakers do their thing. The smell of freshly baked bread is wonderful. We would be fascinated by how the dough rose as if by magic. I can imagine young Jesus and his friends doing the same thing. Fascinated by the rising dough as the bread was baked fresh in the village's shared oven.

Eventually we all learned it was not magic. It was yeast.

Archeologist have discovered bread with yeast that's over 4000 years old. Moreover, yeast is a living organism, breathing in oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide.

Just the tiniest amount is needed to bake bread. Like the tiniest amount of salt is needed to add flavor to food or to preserve it. Like the tiniest mustard seed grows big to offer shade and a home for birds.

Like what tiny tax collector Zacchaeus did. Giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back four times everyone he cheated.

6. THE PEARL AND THE HIDDEN TREASURE

Matthew 13: 44 "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46 on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Most of you know these parables. Scholars call it twin parables. Wealthy men find things of immense value that "they sell everything they have" to possess the pearl for one, a hidden treasure for the other.

Pearls were most valued in Antiquity. Actually until the 19th century when diamonds replaced them.

The key to understanding the parables are the words inside the quotation marks. If you read your Bible, then you know those are the words Jesus says to the rich man who wanted to follow him. Sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor....

The rich man goes away sad. The rich men in the twin parables, after selling everything they had, go away joyful!

Jesus's challenge to the rich has not changed.

7. THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT

Matthew 18: 23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.
26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

Again, the king in the parable is not God. And the story is really not about forgiveness but imperial occupation. We often forget that Palestine was under Roman Occupation during Jesus's time. Before the Romans were the Greeks, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians... After the Romans came the Byzantines, the Early Muslim Dynasties, the Crusaders, the Later Muslim Dynasties, the Ottomans, the British, and now the Israelis.

For me the key to making sense of the parable is the ten thousand talents. That's about 30 billion pesos! When Rome conquered Palestine in 63 BCE, the taxes the empire required from its colony was ten thousand talents.

By the time of Jesus, Palestine has been under Roman Occupation for almost a hundred years. Exploitation was rampant and tax collectors were among the most hated in the land. And Rome executed up to 500 people daily to remind everyone that defiance was unacceptable behavior.

So the king cancels a huge debt which was not really owed. Then and now the powerful has records, books, and documents that show how much the powerless owe. And payment always requires more than what is owed.

And the servant who's supposed debt was canceled? He does exactly what the exploitative system has shaped him to do, be the face of the colonizer to the colonized. More often than not, the colonized never see the face of the colonizer. Only his agents who come from among the colonized.

Then and now the colonizer remains benevolent. Then and now America remains such to several generations of Filipinos. Then and now millions of Filipinos believe that the American occupation was a gift from God.

Read the parable again. The King comes out smelling like a baby's behind. The colonized are portrayed as seeking the king's favor. Classic divide and conquer technique.

8. THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

Luke 11: 5 "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, "Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; 6 for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' 7 And he answers from within, "Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' 8 I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

This parable, like the one about the widow and the judge, is also not about prayer.

It is midnight. Everyone, humans and animals, are indoors and asleep. A neighbor, a friend, gets a surprise visitor on a journey. Since everyone in the peasant village shared an outdoor oven, your friend knows you still have fresh barley loaves. He bangs on your door. Everyone in your house wakes up. Humans and animals. Probably everyone else in the village as well. He asks for bread. The bread you saved for your family. He imposes on your friendship in order to feed his visitor. A complete stranger to you. He shamelessly takes advantage of your friendship in order to fulfill everyone's obligation to welcome strangers. With a simple meal.

You respond. Giving him the three loaves he asked for and, actually, more than he asked for. And you don't do it because of your friendship. You do it because you would have done the same thing.

This is not a parable about prayer. It is the story behind a simple meal prepared to welcome a stranger in a peasant village. To this day, each and every meal that is offered to welcome a stranger in villages, in barrios, in far-flung sitios has a story to tell.

9. THE TEN GIRLS

Matthew 25: 1 "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom.
2 Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. 3 When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; 4 but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. 6 But at midnight there was a shout, "Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' 7 Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' 9 But the wise replied, "No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.' 10 And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.
11 Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, "Lord, lord, open to us.' 12 But he replied, "Truly I tell you, I do not know you."

Your Bible will have a note saying that some ancient manuscripts show the ten bridesmaids were waiting for the bride and the bridegroom.

Many times people read this parable like it were a wake. Like someone died. Like it's the end of the age. It's a wedding! And for communities then and now, it's about new beginnings. Moving forward.

The groom is not Jesus. The bride is not the church. The groom is the groom and the bride is the bride. And both were very late for their wedding. It happens.

The bridesmaids, all ten of them fall asleep waiting. Five were wise. Five were naive. Not foolish. The Greek supports the reading. And all ten girls were, yes, girls. About 12 years old.

Five were mature for their age and prepared. Five acted their age and did not. Those who prepared were not prepared to share. Those who did not prepare were afraid of the dark.

The bride and the groom were so used to locking doors at night. Force of habit. Remember, the banquet began way past midnight. They forgot it was their wedding, all are welcome, so doors need not be shut.

Everyone in the parable made mistakes. A wedding is a celebration of life. It's about new beginnings and moving forward. There's no reason to be afraid of the dark. There's no reason not to share the little we have. And there's no reason to shut anybody out.

10. THE WIDOW AND THE JUDGE

Luke 18: 2 "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, "Grant me justice against my opponent.' 4 For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming."

The parable is not about prayer. Most of the time we hear sermons that tell us that if we persist, like the widow, in prayer, pleading to God, then God, like the judge, will relent.

Stop imagining that the judge in the parable is God. He is not. He is a judge. An unjust judge actually. Like many in our country today.

And then there's the widow. One of the three most dispossessed people in Bible times (along with orphans and foreigners). Pleading for justice. Like so many in our country today. The thousands of widows caused by Duterte's War on Drugs. Tens of thousands of widows brought about by militarization, by large-scale mining, by human trafficking, by the US-led War on Terror, by powers and principalities fueled by greed and hate. All crying out, all relentless, all persistent in their quest for justice.

And the unjust judge relents. Not because he had a change of heart. The situation changed because the widow never gave up. Morning, noon, and night. Rain or shine. She was in his face. Standing her ground. She never lost hope. She fought for justice and justice prevails at the end.

Justice always prevails.

11. THE LOST COIN

Luke 15: 8 "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? 9 When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost."

A few months after Nanay was laid to rest we went through her things. It was very hard. We choked up when we found the bills she kept. A 50 here. A 100 there. Inside a book. Tucked in a blouse pocket hanging in her closet. Inside an old letter's envelope. In a bottle in the kitchen cupboard.

Like many Filipinos we lived from payday to payday and Nanay's "backup system," which so many use, helped keep us afloat.

This is why I love the Parable of the Lost Coin. The woman had ten coins. Each can buy a measure of wheat enough to feed one person. But only the rich ate wheat. Each can buy three measures of barley enough for three. Her ten coins were barely enough for her family to last ten days on barley. Just cheap bread.

And she misplaces one coin! So she searches for it like her family's life depended on it. Because it did. And when she finds the coin, she celebrates with friends and neighbors.

Many among us forget that for so many people, then and now, shalom is actually one coin. Just enough to buy cheap NFA rice for one day.

Just enough to survive for one more day!

12. THE WEDDING BANQUET

Matthew 22: 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.' 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.' 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe,12 and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?' And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Why do we identify the King in the parable with God?

The King is a King. He is on top of an intricate system of honor and shame, patronage, property, and privilege. He is rich. He is powerful. He is benevolent. He hosts a banquet. His invitation is turned down. He is shamed. He gets back at those who shamed him.

He has them killed and burns down their city.

Then he gathers the dregs of society to his banquet. He finds one of the dregs not wearing the wedding robe which the King obviously provided (where do you expect the dregs of society to get clothes for a royal wedding?). The King is a King. He is rich. He is powerful. He is

benevolent but he has been shamed again! He has his minions bind the man, hand and foot, and thrown out to where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We should stop identifying kings in the parables of Jesus with God.

13. THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Matthew 13: 24 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' 28 He answered, "An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?' 29 But he replied, "No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

I'm sure most of us have heard a sermon about this parable. I'm pretty sure most of us heard a metaphorical or allegorical interpretation. I'm also pretty sure that most of us heard an interpretation of this parable that challenged us to be a good wheat.

Incidentally, only the rich could afford wheat bread in Ancient Palestine. The poor ate barley.

I want to focus on the weeds. Masamang damo! Or more appropriately, weeds or tares that look so much like wheat that Palestinians to this day call it "bastard wheat." You can actually call this narrative the parable of the wheat and the bastard wheat!

The parable is akin to the one about sheep and goats. It's about judgment. God's judgment. Not ours. There will be time to separate the wheat from the bastard wheat. In God's time.

Why God? Because wheat and bastard wheat are actually sisters and brothers! God created both. So, God will judge. God will separate. Definitely no one else. Only God.

And since God is a God of surprises, God's judgment will probably surprise both those who self-righteously think they are the good wheat and those whom the good wheat label as bastard wheat.

14. THE LOST SHEEP

Luke 15: 4 "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?
5 When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices.
6 And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

Shepherds are very important characters in the Hebrew Bible. Abel was a shepherd. So was Zipporah and her sisters. Moses and David as well. The Prophet Amos. There are more.

Unfortunately in Palestine during the Roman Occupation, shepherds were despised and were in the lowest rungs of the social order with dung sweepers. Most of them day laborers, even the Gospel of John portrays them as unworthy hired helpers. The Gospel of Luke, on the other hand, tells us that shepherds were the first who received the good news about the birth of the Messiah. Matthew and Luke have the Parable of the Lost Sheep.

The parable talks about a shepherd. A hired help. The scum of society. He was given the responsibility to care for 100 sheep. And he does take care of each one of them. He searches for one who is lost. He celebrates with friends and neighbors when the lost is found.

He may be poor. He may not be hired tomorrow. But today he was given responsibility for 100 sheep. And 99 do not make 100.

15. THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

Matthew 25: 31 "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.
32 All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33 and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34 Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' 37Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38 And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?
39 And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' 40 And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' 41 Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' 44 Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' 45 Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Sheep and goats is a collective term. Most people cannot tell them apart. Especially sheep and goats in Asia and Africa. But shepherds know.

Blessed and cursed is a collective term. People, especially those who are so sure they are blessed, claim they know how to tell them apart. And they have Bible verses to prove it! Especially the blessed and the cursed in a world where 25000 children starve to death every day; where close to 6 billion people survive on 2 dollars a day; and where some people have 7 Mercedes Benzes because "God loves them so much God does not want them to experience vehicle coding."

But the Shepherd in the parable knows. Who are the real blessed ones and who are not. Not me. Nor you. Only the Shepherd knows how to separate them.

Those who were blessed did not expect to be blessed. And those who were not did not expect to be cursed. Their Bible verses did not help.

Every. One. Was. Surprised!

Don't forget this. Ever. God is a God of surprises!

16. THE SOWER

Mark 4: 3 "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.
5Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil.
6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.7 Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. 8 Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

The parable is not about soil. Nor is it a multiple choice question. Have you seen soil deciding to be either soil along the path, rocky, thorny or good soil?

The parable is about a sower. Then, like now, farmers were among the poorest of the poor. They had no land to call their own. Life was so hard half of the population was slowly starving to death. Life was so hard the average life expectancy was 28!

So they had to sow where it would take a miracle for the seed to actually grow. Along the path, among rocks, among thorns. And the seed that fall on good soil? The good soil owned by the rich, the powerful, and the privileged. They all grow, bringing a yield of thirty, sixty, a hundred-fold. A bountiful harvest indeed. For the rich, the powerful, and the privileged.

Do not forget this. Ever. Parables are subversive speech. Parables got Jesus executed.

17. THE "WICKED" TENANTS

Matthew 21: 33 "Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. 34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son.' 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance.' 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" 41 They said to him, "He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time."

Once upon a time there was an absentee landlord who planted a vineyard. He leased it to tenants and left for another country. When harvest came he sent slaves to collect his share of the produce. The tenants beat one, stoned one, and killed another. The landlord sends more slaves. The tenants treat them the same way as they did the first wave. Finally, the landlord sends his son. The tenants, seeing the son, said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." So they seized the son and killed him.

Now, when the absentee landlord comes, what will he do to the tenants? He will put those wretches to a miserable death and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at harvest time.

The rich absentee landlord had every right to do what he did. He owned the land. He probably had the titles to prove that. He had a valid contract with the tenants. They broke the terms of the contract. And worse, killed his heir. The rich landlord had every right to kill each and every one who had a hand in his heir's death. Everyone! At the end

of the parable, the landlord was still rich. He still has slaves. He has new tenants. He has lost a son. But he has avenged his heir by destroying all the "wicked" tenants who had actually tried to seize his land for their own.

The rich, absentee, landlord is not God. The heir is not Jesus. The rich, absentee, landlord is a rich, absentee, landlord. Like the Cojuancos. The Consunjis. The Enriles. The heir is a landlord in training. He will eventually get the land. Then after him, his heir. Anyone who tries to seize the landlord's property will be eliminated.

Dispossessed farmers, peasants, tenants beware: if you collectively try to seize lands that belong to the rich, you and your kin will have a miserable death.

18. THE TALENTS

Matthew 25: 14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them;
15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.
20 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.' 21 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.' 22 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.' 23 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.' 24 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; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' 26 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? 27 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. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 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. 30 As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

A rich man entrusts his property to three of his slaves. To one he gives five talents; to the second, two; to the third, one. The one with five traded with them and earns five more. The one with two, doing the same, earns two more. The third, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time, the master returns and settles accounts with them. The first and second slaves are found trustworthy and put in charge of more things and invited to enter into the joy of their master. The third who returns the one talent he received is thrown out into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Why?

Because he was not willing to become a party to the ways of his master who was harsh, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. Moreover, his master expected 100% returns on his property which the other two slaves did.

Lest we forget, a talent is 15 years' wages. At minimum rates, in Philippine pesos that is about 3 million pesos. The first got 15 million and earned 15 million. The second, 6 million and earned 6 million. The third slave was brave enough to say no to a system that was built on profit, greed, and violence. And he was punished for doing so.

My friends, this parable is not about one's talents in singing, dancing, leading Bible Studies, teaching Sunday School, and other "talents." It has never been about these.

19. THE PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15: 11 Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. 13 A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14 When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16 He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." ' 20 So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. 21 Then the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; 24 for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate. 25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, "Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.

30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the

father said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.' "

There was a man with two sons.

He was rich. He had property. He had land. He had slaves. He had two sons. The younger asks for his inheritance and squanders it. He goes back home and is welcomed back by his father. With a feast, a robe, sandals, and a ring. The older is angry, feels slighted, and left out so the father reminds him that "you are always with me and all is mine is yours."

In the end, everybody lives happily ever after. Father and sons. Still propertied. Still landed. Still slaveholders. Still rich.

My friends, we should stop identifying rich fathers, rich landowners, and rich slaveholders with God.

The parables of Jesus were subversive speech. They indicted the status quo. They challenged Pax Romana. They were partly the reason Jesus was arrested, beaten up, tried by a mock jury, and executed.

20. THE SAMARITAN

Luke 10: 30 "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend."

We know this story already. Surveys show that this story is one of the two most Christians call their favorite. The other is the Prodigal Son.

Both come from Luke. Those of us who have read and studied Luke know that this gospel has a particular bias for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, the foreigner, and the outsider…

A man is near death along the bloody way that connects Jerusalem and Jericho and the people we expect to stop and help ignore him. Two people actually help. The Samaritan. Most hated. Most despised during Jesus's time. Most unexpected to help does help. And so does the Inn-keeper. Both nurse the man back to health. No questions asked.

In the past few months, several thousand people have died. Over thirteen thousand as of November 2017. They were near death but because we, like the Priest and the Levite in the story, chose not to stop and chose to ignore them. We chose to let them die. We found them near death, victims of a menace we call drugs and worse, targets in the War on Drugs. But we chose to let them die rather than nurture them back to health.

In the coming days, more will die. Thousands.

Unless we, all of us, decide to follow the example of the Samaritan and the Inn-keeper, including Priests and Levites. We must demand a stop to the killings. We must carry our near-death sisters and brothers to safe places where they can heal. If we do not know how to do this, we must learn. We must open our hands, our hearts, our homes, our churches, our hospitals, our schools, so that we can nurture our near-death sisters and brothers back to health.

And we must do this now!

21. THE MUSTARD SEED

Mark 4: 30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

Gaius Plinius Secundus (aka Pliny the Elder) in his Natural History 19.170-171 wrote that "mustard [sinapi kokkos] … grows entirely wild… and when it is sown, it is scarcely possible to get the place free of it, as the seed when it falls germinates at once."

John Dominic Crossan tells us that the mustard in the parable was a wild weed shrub that grew to about five feet or even higher. Even in their domesticated form they were a lot to handle. Mustard in a well-kept garden not only spread beyond expectations but also attracted birds of all forms thus disturbing the natural balance of a well-manicured garden, with the birds' unpredictable feeding habits, and worse, their droppings.

Gardeners, of course, did not want weeds in their gardens. They did not want wild mustard at all cost. They spend time creating the perfect balance in their gardens: putting in the best, throwing out the worst. A well-manicured garden has no room for wild mustard, so they cut mustard young and at the roots. The mustard weed though have a way of coming back.

They always do.

The parable likens God's reign to a weed. It grows where it is not wanted and eventually takes over the place. All wild mustard have to be cut down lest they disturb the domesticity of the gardens tended by the rich, the powerful, and the religious elite.

But wild weeds have a way of coming back. When you least expect them. Ask any gardener. You can never completely eradicate wild weeds like mustard. They have a way of sprouting in places where they disturb, disrupt, and dismantle well-manicured gardens.

They always do!

22. The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16: 19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.24 He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' 25 But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' 27 He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29 Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30 He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

Scholars tell us of two ancient stories that resonate with this parable of Jesus. One is Egyptian. The other rabbinical. The former is about the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. The latter was about Abraham's servant Eleazar (Lazarus in Greek) who walked the earth in disguise to check on Abraham's children's observance of God's command to care for orphans, widows, strangers, and the poor.

In Jesus's parable Lazarus wasn't in disguise. He was so poor, sick, and starving that his plight was described by Abraham as evil. He was in such misery and dehumanizing state that his company was wild street

dogs. He died and was not buried. Being buried is the last act of human decency that societies have practiced for millenia. Lazarus died and no one was around to bury him.

The rich man feasted every day. He died. He was buried. I'm sure in grand fashion. With scores of professional crying ladies.

Today, many people find dogs better company than their fellow human beings. Unfortunately, thousands still starve to death every single day. And one nation, which prides itself Christian, has enough resources to feed 40 billion people. That's 6 times the population of the world.

23. THE RICH FOOL

Luke 12: 16 "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. [17] And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' [18] Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. [19] And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' [20] But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' [21] So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

I read somewhere that Rockefeller was asked how much money would satisfy him. His answer? More. In the part of the Philippines where I reside, there are vast tracts of land, thousands of hectares, owned by one family. In the past three years, according to Ibon Foundation, the net worth of the richest Filipinos almost doubled.

Historians tell us that in First Century Palestine practically all the land was either owned or controlled by the ruling elite. And, yes, this group included the religious leaders.

In the parable, the rich man had a problem. His harvest was so plentiful his barns were not enough to contain them. The solution? Bring down his old barns and build bigger ones. Half of the population then was slowly starving to death. Sharing? Never crossed his mind.

He died that night.

Scientists tell us that 666 billion dollars can address the world's biggest problems: poverty, hunger, illiteracy, health and sanitation... But the world's richest actually spends more and more and more each year on weapons of mass destruction. Last year, 1.7 trillion dollars!

Sharing? Tragically, like yesterday and tomorrow, 25,000 children from the poorest countries, aged 5 and younger, would be dead from starvation tonight.

24. THE FIG TREE

Luke 13: 6 "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7 So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' 8 He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

For three years the owner of the Fig tree has waited. For three years he was patient. For three years he longed for one thing, fruit from his tree. Three years pass and there were none. So he orders his gardener to chop it down. Waste of good soil. His gardener pleads, "Give it another year. I will dig around it and put manure." Give it another year.

We call them people with "green thumbs." People who love plants. People who sing and talk to them like they were people. People like the gardener who pleads, "Give it another year." People who celebrate the inter-connectedness of all life. People who believe in second chances for everyone.

Then there are people who treat everything as property. As commodity. As disposable. And a handful of them just acquired over 600,000 square kilometers of prime agricultural land. For development. For profit.

And I am sure, they will chop down not just Fig trees.

THE TWO SONS

Matthew 21: 28 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' 29 He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. 30 The father[a] went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go.

The Gospel of Matthew used this Jesus parable to address the hypocrisy of the religious leaders of his time (about 60 years after Jesus's ministry). For Matthew's Jesus the tax collectors and the prostitutes were the older son. The religious elite was the younger.

Tatay had two sons, my older brother and I. I have two sons. Thus, the parable of the two sons is quite a personal one for me.

The father asks both his sons to help out in the vineyard. The older said no but afterward changed his mind and went. The younger said yes but afterward changed his mind and did not go.

During Jesus's time, the family, the basic unit of Roman society, was run and owned by the father. Augustus, Roman Emperor, was Father of All Fathers. Fathers had the power of life and death over everyone in his family. Everyone was the father's property.

The two sons in the parable both disobey their father. The older by word. The younger by deed. We know that fathers then killed children who disobeyed them. Tragically, there are still fathers today who kill their children for disobeying them. Fathers who treat their children as property.

But not the father in the parable. No one is thrown into places where there is darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. No one is banished. No one is punished.

The father is probably like Joseph, Jesus's father. Like Tatay. Like your father. I don't remember the number of times Kuya and I have disobeyed Tatay. Growing up, I'm sure Jesus and his siblings did too. I don't remember how many times my two sons have disobeyed me and their mother.

And I think that's the point of the parable. Parents do not remember their children's disobedience because they do not count them. Children are people, not property. And people change. I'm sure there were more times the sons disobeyed their father if we continued the story. But I want to believe that eventually they got to the point where they did not have to be told what to do.

26. THE SEED THAT GROWS IN SECRET

Mark 4: 26"The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, [27] and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. [28] The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. [29] But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

Most of us had to do this science project early in grade school. Bring soil in see-through pots or containers. And some seeds. In many cases in the Philippines, we brought mongo beans. We called this project, the life cycle of a plant.

Many times our next science project was the life cycle of a frog. But this is topic for another time.

Back to the mongo beans. We waited patiently for the seeds to change. For six-year olds, waiting for hours takes forever. Then we see the surprise. Slowly but surely the tiny seeds become plants. And we watch in awe and wonder.

People whose hearts beat with the heart beat of Mother Earth know this parable. Not as a story but as the reality of life. Life begets life. Each seed bears a promise.

Many times we forget that God's creation helps God create. The waters bring forth fish of all kinds. The earth brings forth plants and animals. Many times we forget that we, you and I, are latecomers to the cycles and dances of life.

Maybe it's time we just step back and watch in awe and wonder. Like we did when we were six years old.

27. THE SHREWD MANAGER

Luke 16. 1"There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly;

There are so many ways this parable from Luke 16 has been interpreted.

Some work. Some do not. Especially those that insist that the rich master is a metaphor for God. The rich master is a rich master. Charges are brought against his manager or steward for dishonesty. Apparently, other managers want him out of the picture, thus the charges.

The manager, finding his position in jeopardy and knowing he cannot do manual labor and is ashamed to beg, does what anyone would do in his situation. Damage control. Find a way to make sure that he does not end up on the streets. He cuts his losses by literally cutting his commission.

What he does gets him his job back. His rich master commends him.

And those in debt, less indebted.

This is the way things actually work. Then and now. That is why the rich are still rich. This is the way of empire. This is the complete opposite of the Kingdom of God.

28. THE FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISH

John 6: 5 When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him,
Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to
eat?" 6 He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to
do. 7 Philip answered him, "Six months' wages[b] would not buy enough
bread for each of them to get a little." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew,
Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five
barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many
people?" 10 Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a
great deal of grass in the place; so they[c] sat down, about five thousand
in all. 11 Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he
distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as
they wanted. 12 When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up
the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." 13 So they gathered
them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those
who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets.

There are so many people who imagine this story, which we find in all four canonical gospels, as an actual event in Jesus's ministry. There are those who argue that it is a parable. All the parables we have looked at so far are stories that Jesus told.

This one is different. It's a parable from the early church. Jesus is a character in the parable.

He sees the multitude hungry and, following the teachings of the Law and the Prophets, he tells his disciples to feed them. His disciples make up excuses. Send the crowd away. Let them feed themselves. We don't have enough funds to address the situation. The excuses then sound so much like our excuses today.

Then a young child, possibly 12 years old or younger, offers what he has. Five barley loaves and two fish. And the miracle of feeding of the 5000 begins.

Do not forget this. Ever. The bread and the fish that led to the feeding of the HUNGRY multitudes were offered by a HUNGRY child. Many times, God's liberating acts begin when one, just one we usually do not expect, takes that step forward, that leap of faith, that offering of bread and fish.

"There are examples, however, of critical theory that is distinctly Asian or a modification of Western modes of thought with Asian interests. Using Western theory and method is inescapable and can even be considered a witting tool, used by the colonized when they try to "write back and work against colonial assumptions, representations, and ideologies" (Sugirtharajah, 1998, p. x). The ***Filipino Jeepney hermeneutics*** *is one such venture, demonstrating the capacity to transform tools of mass destruction into resources for life (as in the writings of Revelation E. Velunta). Thus, while cultural studies is not just an Asian American interpretive mode of discourse, it may be utilized by Asian interpreters in a more critical manner."*

Jin Young Choi, "Asian/Asian American Interpretation." The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies, 2014. Accessible online at http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/article/opr/t453/e1)

JEEPNEY HERMENEUTICS

Beating Swords into Ploughshares

Our country's history has been up for grabs, like its wealth, and everyone has grabbed it except our people. We do not figure in the narrative, except as sidekicks who get rapped in the head and get to be called pango and pandak and negro to provide comic relief. We do not figure in that movie, except as foils and extras to make the leading men and women look good.
-Conrado de Quiros

INTRODUCTION

Biblical Studies in the Philippines have been a stronghold of colonial scholarship for over a century, especially among Protestant Churches. Denominations refuse to go autonomous and continue to depend on "mother" institutions in the United States. Church buildings and institutions are named after "benevolent" foreign church leaders and missionaries. Many seminaries continue to privilege European-American teachers (who are paid in dollars by foreign boards) over Filipinos (who are paid in pesos and usually way below the living wage). A handful of these missionaries still hold leadership positions in many seminaries. Of course, the medium of instruction remains the "Master's Tongue," English. Libraries are still filled with books from Europe and the U.S., and continue to receive donations of old ones from the First World. It is not uncommon to find teachers and students who take pride in being called disciples of Barth or Bultmann or Niebuhr. In fact, many pastor's children whose names are Karl or Paul were named after Barth and Tillich.

Kwok Pui-lan rightly observes: "In theological education, a large part of the curriculum has been the study of the lives and thoughts of white, male, Euro-American theologians, to the exclusion of many other voices. More importantly, the theologies done by these people are considered normative, which set the standards and parameters of what 'theology' should be."

Traditional historical critical methods remain the key reading paradigm. Establishing what texts meant before is the first step toward discerning what they mean today. Interpretations that follow strict historical critical methodologies are praised and characterized as "correct exegesis," "scholarly," and "objective." Interpretations that do not follow this so-called fundamental paradigm are labeled, at best, "interesting," or at worst, "eisegesis."

R.S. Sugirtharajah argues: "Historical-critical methods were not only colonial in the sense that they displaced the norms and practices of our

indigenous reading methods, but in that they were used to justify the superiority of Christian texts and to undermine the sacred writings of others… These methods are colonial because they insist that a right reading is mediated through the proper use of historical-critical tools alone…" For example, look at the opening of George Strecker's *The Sermon on the Mount: An Exegetical Commentary* (1988): 'No proper exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount can ignore the research of more than two hundred years of historical-critical research into the New Testament'" (1998a:126).

Many Filipino Protestants know more about Bible and American history than their own, and they read the Bible the way their colonial masters did, and still do, because they have been socialized for generations that this is the correct way. Filipino social scientists call this collective condition of the Filipino psyche as colonial mentality. Historian Renato Constantino traces it to the systematic miseducation of the Filipinos. Eleazar Fernandez argues that the Philippines can be called a "mental colony" of the United States of America.

But side by side with this "reading the Bible the way our masters do" is the wealth of Filipino reading strategies that engage the Bible in unexpected ways. Larry Caldwell, in *Towards the New Discipline of Ethno- hermeneutics: Questioning the Relevancy of Western Hermeneutical Methods in the Asian Context*, illustrates this as he narrates his experience in the Philippines:

The more I taught the more frustrated I became. I gave my students assignments to read each night in the confines of the well-stocked school library (with all the books written in English). I did this even though I knew that, upon graduation, these financially poor students would receive a packet containing a dozen or so theological books (in English). For most this would be the extent of their access to any kind of theological library for the remainder of their lives. I knew that something was gravely wrong, but what was it? I eventually came to question the appropriateness of my western methods in this non-western context. Everything had been imported from the West, including most of the faculty, the books, and the curriculum. Everything that was taught relied

heavily on the western trappings of book knowledge and library research.

Nowhere was this more apparent to me than in my Interpreting the Bible class. Here I diligently taught my students the "proper" methods of Bible interpretation and they just as diligently wrote down and memorized everything I said. I taught them the finer points of Bible interpretation, from initial exegesis to sermon preparation. Several of my students did surprisingly well in class. Most struggled. And then, on the weekends, I would accompany them to their rural church field education assignments and listen to them preach in their churches. Here was my chance to observe them putting into practice what they had so painstakingly learned in my classroom. Or so I thought. In stark contrast to the exegetically correct and logically constructed three-point sermons they had prepared in class, what I heard were sermons full of allegories and folksy illustrations, with a storyline that seemed to run circles around a loosely constructed main point. They were exegeting the Bible in ways that would earn them a failing grade in the classroom. I was one disconcerted hermeneutics professor! My frustrations, however, lessened over time as I began to realize that my students were making sense to their audience. They were communicating the truths of the Bible in ways that the people from their own rural culture understood. They were communicating the gospel. And they were doing so, for the most part, using non-western hermeneutical methods.

Jeepney hermeneutics, as an explicitly decolonizing reading, is one of these non-western hermeneutical methods. The term "jeepney" can mean several things. According to Conrado de Quiros, "the Jeepney is basically an extension of the Filipino home." He continues:

From a plain-looking contraption the Americans used before and during the War, an object known only for its resolute utility, it has become a walking, or crawling, well, call it what you will. Some call it "folk art," others call it a monstrosity. It has enlarged on the scope of utility. It can now fit more people than the original jeep. Just by how much, you will know if you have taken a jeepney in the province, which mushrooms with people on the entrance steps, at the back, and on the roof.

Also, for many people, "jeepney" denotes "Made in the Philippines" or "Proudly, Philippine-made." De Quiros calls jeepneys gaudy displays of the magical, demented, colorful, chaotic, fun-loving, incontinent Filipino spirit. It also denotes characteristics or traits uniquely Filipino, like the people's hospitality, their humor, their love for music, etc. Robert Ong calls it "pambansang simbolo… kasing ordinaryo ito ng bigas, bentilador, at pagligo araw-araw… hindi ka lang basta nakaupo sa isang sasakyan, nakasakay ka sa isang kultura." (Jeepneys are national symbols… they are as ordinary as rice, electric fans, and taking a bath every day. A jeepney ride is more than just a ride in a vehicle, it is a cultural experience.)

According to Gerald Arbuckle, "A people can communicate, transmit, and hand over their culture to the coming generations by means of symbols. And the whole gamut of their knowledge, values, beliefs, and outlook in life is thus transmitted." For Victor Turner, symbols are "almost every article...every gesture...every song or prayer, every unit of space and time that stands for something other than itself. It is more than it seems, and often a good deal more." Simply put, a jeepney symbolizes the Filipino. It is also, as I will argue, a "text of resistance." And Jeepney hermeneutics are uniquely Filipino ways of interpreting texts, particularly biblical texts.

WHOSE STORY IS IT?

Whose story is it? Isagani Cruz teaches his students to always ask this question of any text. On the shores of Mactan Island, in Central Philippines, there stand two monuments, both memorializing April 27, 1521. The first one was erected in 1941 when the Philippines was still a U.S. colony. The other was erected six years after the U.S.-sponsored Independence Day on 4 July 1946. These monuments serve as testament to the reality that there are at least two ways to tell a story. There are other ways of reading. And, as I will argue, there are legion.

Franklin Balasundaran wrote *EATWOT in Asia: Toward a Relevant Theology*. It traces the history and impact of the Ecumenical

Association of Third-World Theologians from its inception in 1976. It points to capitalism, feudalism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism as the forces that continue to oppress people in Asia, particularly people in the Philippines. Filipinos are among the most colonized peoples in the world having been under several colonial masters for over four centuries. Eleazar Fernandez points out that, "perhaps, more than any Third World peoples, Filipinos despise their own selves, their culture, their heritage, and the products of their own hands. Many like to think of themselves as little, brown Americans."

Epifanio San Juan argues that literary production among Filipinos continues to be largely beholden to methods and theories from the West, particularly the United States.

Randolf David, in his *Ang Pagkagapos ng Agham Panlipunang Pilipino (The Bondage of Filipino Social Sciences)* is more explicit: "Ang maka-Pilipinong pananaliksik… ay hindi maisasagawa hangga't hindi tayo nakaka-alpas sa pagkatali sa mga teorya't konseptong Amerikano na patuloy na lumalason sa ating kamalayan." (Authentic pro-Filipino studies … will never materialize unless we unshackle ourselves from our bondage to American theories and concepts that continue to poison our consciousness.) David thus echoes J. Galtung's argument that "imperialism is so paralyzing, so alienating a system that it must be demolished before any serious development can take place." Helen Graham adds that as long as imperialism is in place, genuine peace is not possible.

Fernando Segovia defines the imperial-colonial framework as the structural reality practiced in terms of a primary dynamic: on the one hand, a political, economic, and cultural center, more often than not symbolized by a city or metropole; on the other hand, any number of margins, colonies, politically, economically, and culturally subordinated to the center…. (T)his primary dynamic entails and engenders in turn any number of secondary binomials: civilized/uncivilized; modern/primitive; cultured/barbarian. This reality should not be seen as uniform in every imperial context across time and culture, but as maps or broad representations; and this reality is of such reach and such

power that it affects and colors the entire artistic production of both center and margins, especially their literary production. Yet, in the wake of this reality lies the inverted, deconstructing, de- colonizing dynamic of resistance, where the margins actually take the initiative, while the center is forced into a reactive position.

Fernandez points out, "Though subjected to the most sophisticated political machinations and cultural genocide, the Filipino soul has never been totally crushed." This coincides with Fernando Segovia's last point above that "in the wake of imperial reality lies the inverted, deconstructing dynamic of resistance… where the margins actually take the initiative." "Resistance," according to Renato Constantino, "is the unifying thread of Philippine history."

"No uprising fails. Each one is a step in the right direction." Reynaldo Ileto memorializes this famous saying of peasant leader Salud Algabre in his Pasyon and Revolution. Algabre was one of the leaders of the anti- American Sakdal uprising in 1935. The quote is from an interview she gave in 1968. Ileto comments that her words affirm that each resistance movement, in whatever form it is mounted against the empire, against colonial and now neocolonial rule, learns from the experience, particularly the mistakes, of its predecessors. Though an uprising leads to failure, it helps pave the way for it becomes part of that archival power that eventually leads to victory.

FROM SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES

Jose Rizal's annotation of Antonio Morga's Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas, Virgilio Enriquez's Sikolohiyang Pilipino, Conrado De Quiros's rereading of Philippine history, the jeepney, and the Barong Tagalog are examples of the Filipinos' capacity to "beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks." There are more. Many pastors point out that the bells in several churches in Northern Luzon came from mortar shells circa World War II. Community workers in Mindanao share poignant stories of young musicians who transformed rifle barrels into flutes. From mortar shells to church bells, from

implements of death to instruments of music, Filipinos have turned weapons of mass destruction to symbols of mass celebration.

Of course, Filipinos are not the only colonized people who beat swords into ploughshares. Many flutes used by Native Americans and Palestinians come from rifle barrels. The Peace Bell in Hwacheon Country between North and South Korea, rung daily at 6 in the evening, is made from melted implements of death from the Korean War. Church bells in Ethiopian Orthodox Churches come from Soviet tanks. Flower pots that Palestinian mothers hang along the Apartheid Wall in their homeland come from Israeli-made tear gas cannisters.

According to Rosalinda Acupanda-McGloin, in Tinikling: The Art of Becoming Filipino, most people associate the Tinikling, the bamboo dance, with the barrio fiesta: a village annual thanksgiving festivity and an occasion for reunions and community celebrations, full of fun and merriment, music and dance, and skill competitions. Tinikling is a dance of skilled artistry of foot movement and grace. It is a battle between dancer's feet and bamboo poles, an attempt to take the other to its utmost limit of possibility and endurance. As it happens, people cheer all around.

She volunteers: "Tinikling went through an evolution of sorts before it became the Philippine's national dance. A simple narration of its origin just stops with the bird, Tikling (a heron), standing on its long thin-legs, and often times one-legged with the other leg curled in, in the rice paddies of rural country-side Philippines. Various versions have been handed down through oral histories and folklore. Consider the following version — perhaps part fact, part legend."

She continues: For nearly four hundred years, the indios, as Spaniards called the natives of the islands they called Felipinas, were herded out as the labor force in the fields and paddies of their own land. Those who were slow faced a form of punishment where they stood between rough poles of bamboo cut from the grove. The bamboo poles were then clapped to beat the indios' feet, with the indios trying very hard to get ahead between the clapping of the bamboo by jumping up, and

down when the bamboo poles were apart. Of course, their feet ended up more bruised and beaten since the poles had thorns sticking from their segments. This colonial punishment became a vicious cycle—the more their feet were bruised, the less work they could put in the fields, the more they were punished.

Perhaps, when the workers returned to the rice fields with their feet bruised and bleeding from the beatings, they inadvertently laid out the matrix for the dance. Perhaps, the natives felt the stabbing pain through their bodies as they planted their feet in the rice paddies. Perhaps, their reflex movement was to withdraw and curl up the injured foot. Perhaps, in the shadows or from a distance, they looked like the heron, the bird Tikling.

Perhaps, they had to take their bodies to the utmost limit of possibility to endure the pain, just as, perhaps, they had to raise their feet as nimbly and as fast, taking the bamboo poles to their utmost capacity to torture. And perhaps, Acupanda-McGloin continues, as is often said of stories like this, it came to pass. Thus, every time the music is played and the festivity begins, the Tinikling is danced as a story of the art of endurance, of a people that persevered. The Tinikling is yet another example of beating swords into ploughshares.

If decolonization is to be realized, Filipino nationalists should continue writing histories "from below;" histories written from the vantage point of the people, the poor and the forgotten in the histories written by Spaniards, Americans, and mga makapili (collaborators). If decolonization is to take place in how Filipinos read the Bible, then theological educators should promote readings that privilege the pango at pandak at negro - behind, within, and in front of the text.

Constantino argues that Filipino resistance to colonial oppression is the unifying thread of Philippine history. This argument also applies to the variety of non-traditional ways many Filipinos have read the Bible. Jeepney hermeneutics, as an example of the Filipino capacity to "beat swords into ploughshares," celebrates these alternative readers and their readings.

BEATING JEEPS INTO JEEPNEYS

The western mind is so used to having everything planned and performing like clockwork while the Filipino, conditioned by survival instincts and desperate situations, can do things on-the-spot, waiting for every development to guide the next big move. This is simply revolting to the western mind…. The jeepney is typically representative of the Filipino character. It evolved out of a need to survive, to earn a living, to augment an inadequate transport system. Western countries will have all the reasons not to have the jeepney as a means of public transport. Yet here [in the Philippines] millions ride to work and school daily on it. Actually, majority prefer it to the buses.
-Observations of What We Are, The Philippine Daily Inquirer, 19 April 2001

Musa Dube reminds us that, "When it comes to the connection of the Bible, its readers, and its institutions to Western imperialism, there is no call for special pleading. The evidence is overwhelming" (2000:15).

Laura Donaldson asks: "What civilization invented the most brutal system of conquest and exploitation the world has ever known? Christian. Who made slavery the basis for capitalist expansion? Christians. What religion has been the most responsible for the genocide of aboriginal peoples? Christianity. In my view, the Christian church has a much more substantial record of pure evil than any final good" (7).

Canaan Banana posits that the Bible is an important book of the church and that it includes liberating messages; nevertheless, there remains the sense in which, unless one embraces the Christian concept of God, one is not fully a person of God (Dube, 2000:14). Mary John Mananzan points out that the Bible, in spite of all the reinterpretations, remains a book written from a patriarchal, dominator, imperial perspective and thus must be used to inform and not define Filipino life and struggles (176-177). How then does one do a decolonizing reading of an

imperializing text? In other words, "how does one read the Bible without perpetuating the self-serving paradigm of contracting one group as superior to another?" (Dube, 2000:15)

How do Asian Christians "overcome the alienation they feel as they try to relate the biblical world, colonial Christianity, and their own reality"? (Kwok: 42). For Filipinos, I suggest Jeepney hermeneutics.

Most Filipino readings fall within a spectrum: at one end are interpretations that fundamentally mimic European-American exegesis. I have observed over and over again seminary students and pastors lifting out materials from William Barclay's Daily Study Bible series, the multi- volume New Interpreter's Bible, even the devotionals, Our Daily Bread and The Upper Room, for their sermons and Bible studies. Carlos Abesamis remarks that nothing is the matter with foreigners doing foreign theology (for themselves). The issue is that Filipino theology is a photocopy of Euro- American theology (1997:23, 33).

At the middle of the spectrum is the more widespread interpretive practice of using local illustrations with foreign, mostly Western, analytical tools and methods. In other words, many Filipino readings present data from the local context yet, to echo Tinyiko Maluleke, "its explanatory strategies are seldom, if ever, fashioned out of local practices, beliefs, and cultures" (243). Maryhill School of Theology scholar Ver Miranda, for example, is explicit when he describes his methodology as "socio-literary" and "historical- critical." Maluleke cautions: "There is something wrong when analytical frameworks must almost always be derived from outside" (243). Stanley Samantha's observation applies to the Filipino context: "Every time Biblical scholars in Europe and America sneeze, theologians in Asia should not catch a cold and manifest the symptoms all over the footnotes! To depend on rules of interpretation developed in countries alien to Asian life is a hindrance to the Church's growth in maturity."

At the other end of the spectrum are interpretations that privilege life over the biblical text, readings that re-write, re-tell, re-imagine the text

in the light of flesh and blood readers' diverse contexts. I call these interpretations Jeepney hermeneutics. These readings are results of a Filipino way of "beating swords into ploughshares" called "pangingisda" or "pamimingwit."

FILIPINOS, "FISHING," AND JEEPNEYS

"Pangingisda" or "pamimingwit" is an indigenous term that best describes what underpins many Filipino resistance symbols and rituals. Leny Mendoza Strobel points out that the invitation, "Mangisda tayo" or "Mamingwit tayo" (literally, Let's go fishing), aside from the obvious meaning describes the Filipino practice of fishing out words or phrases from a stream of unintelligible discourses and proceeding to weave a relevant narrative that oftentimes have little or no relation to the discourse that produced it. It is akin to Nicole Wilkinson's observation: "It is like Jacob wrestling with the angel, in darkness, not knowing whether it is friend or foe, but determined nevertheless to extract a blessing from it." Jaime Belita argues that the Filipino's widespread devotion to the Sto. Nino and the Suffering Christ are forms of "fishing," that affirm meaning different from what was intended.

Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution* documents how revolutionary movements in the Philippines from 1840 to 1910 "fished" out a totally different interpretation of the pasyon compared to what the Spaniards intended. The *Casaysayan nang Pasiong Mahal ni Jesucristong Panginoon Natin* [Account of the Sacred Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ] or Pasyon was introduced by the Spanish authorities to inculcate upon the Indios loyalty to Spain and Church. The Pasyon was supposed to encourage resignation to things as they were and to instill preoccupation with morality and the afterlife. As Ileto argues, the masses read something else. They saw their plight and eventual liberation in the pasyon. Instead of encouraging passivity, the pasyon made available a language for venting ill feelings against oppressive friars, principales, and agents of the state. People who joined Andres Bonifacio's Katipunan saw the revolution in terms of the pasyon.

"Bonifacio, for instance, patterned his famous manifesto entitled 'Ang Dapat Mabatid ng mga Tagalog' after the pasyon. Like Adam and Eve in Paradise, the Tagalogs were whole and happy before the Spaniards came. The Spanish friars, like the serpent were full of envy. Like both Christ and Mary, the Tagalogs consequently suffered. The redemption of the country, Bonifacio suggested, was as inevitable as the redemption narrated in the pasyon: therefore, the Tagalogs would successfully revolt against the Spaniards" (Cruz, 1984b:73).

Let us go back to Cruz's question of texts, "Whose story is it?" If it is not the Filipinos', then are they able to "fish" out something from it and create their own stories? They are able, and they have.

As noted earlier, on the shores of Mactan stand two markers commemorating the same day. One was built in 1941, the other in 1951. The earlier marker erected by the US commonwealth reads: "On this spot Ferdinand Magellan died on April 27, 1521, wounded in an encounter with the soldiers of Lapulapu, chief of Mactan Island. One of Magellan's ships, the Victoria, under the command of Juan Sebastian Elcano, sailed from Cebu on May 1, 1521, and anchored at San Lucar de Barrameda on September 6, 1522, thus completing the first circumnavigation of the earth."

In 1951, Filipinos "fished" out Lapulapu from that story and created another story, another monument; one they can call their own. This one reads: "Here, on April 27, 1521, Lapulapu and his warriors repulsed the Spanish invaders, killing their leader, Ferdinand Magellan. Thus, Lapulapu became the first Filipino to have repelled European aggression." The resistance continues.

A jeepney is a "fished" out reading of a jeep. At the end of the Second World War, Americans had a problem: what to do with the surplus of jeeps rotting and rusting at various depots in the Philippines (Nofuente, 1998; Ravenholt, 1962). Thus was born the jeepney. What the Americans thought useless, Filipinos found useful. A jeep's transformation into a jeepney begins when its original intent, its imperializing function, is set aside. First, its weapons and mounts are

removed. Then, its body is stretched to create more space, to accommodate more people. Today's twenty or more -seater PUJ (public utility jeep) has more than seven times the capacity of the three-seater jeep. Most jeepneys have a radio, an eight-track, a tiny electric fan, photographs pasted on the walls, window drapes, even an altar: a Filipino home on wheels. The jeepney is akin to what Elsa Tamez calls "a house in which there is room for everybody" (205). Valerio Nofuente takes pride in the jeepney's elasticity; there is always room for one more. He notes:

If a child is in the jeep and an adult gets in, he or she is offered a lap (not necessarily a relative's) to sit on in order to make space. If a woman laden with a market basket and a chicken gets in, hands reach out for her basket, and feet are moved aside to find a place for it. The passengers seem to be performing a ritual. They are, as a matter of fact, not facing the direction of their destination, but each other… It is something like the Filipino home. If one arrives while the family is at table, an extra place is immediately laid, and the rice and fish somehow are enough for all, for everyone to adjust his or her intake for the guest.

Simply put, in jeepneys, Filipinos have created a vehicle of their culture out of a vehicle of war.

HOW TO BEAT JEEPS INTO JEEPNEYS

Most interpretations can be summarized into three categories: those that locate meaning "behind texts," those that locate meaning "in the texts," and those that locate meaning "in front of the texts." Those interpretations that fall under the first category presuppose that scripture serves a referential function, the text is a window to a privileged past—to Israel, to the historical Jesus, to the gospel writers and their intentions, to the early Christian communities, etc.—that could be recovered. Interpretation is therefore aimed at first establishing what the text meant, in order to arrive at what it means for today. The task of the interpreter is to recover meaning from behind the text to the historical setting from which it came. Traditional

historical-critical methods like form, source, and redaction criticism would fall under this category.

The second category of interpretations employ "closed reading" focused on plot, characters, setting, discourse, structure, implied authors and implied readers in order to get at "what is in the text." If the first category privileged the past that the text referred to as the source of meaning, the second category privileges the text itself. This category would include most literary methods like narrative, structural, and rhetorical criticism. In such cases interpreters presuppose scripture as story, a text that "has life all its own." And this "living" text is able to create or conjure up communities of readers/hearers.

The third category would include readings that privilege social location. Meaning, this category, is not located in the past or in the text, but in parts of the text that point "beyond the text" or "in front of the text": its rhetorical features as well as all the signs of ideological tensions, whether these are socio-economic, political, cultural, religious tensions that are recognizable, even though the text seeks to suppress them, for instance by marginalizing characters, institutions, or events that would manifest these tensions. These rhetorical features and ideological tensions are textual features that point "beyond the text," in the sense that they are recognizable by the ways in which they powerfully affect readers in situations similar to those suppressed by the text. Thus, these "in front of the text" textual features are most directly recognizable when they are activated by present-day readers. After all, interpretations are, as Mark Taylor puts it, "constructs of socially located flesh-and-blood readers." Scripture then serves as a mirror that helps inform—not define—concrete life settings. Most advocacy approaches—feminist, liberationist, queer, womanist, reader-response criticism, cultural, and post-colonial studies—would fall under this category.

This proposal, as an example of a "reading in front of texts" takes into account the primary role of culture and socio-political context in interpretations of the Bible, and in the process elucidates dimensions of the text that otherwise would remain hidden. Simply put, I am a

Filipino and jeepney hermeneutics is a Filipino reading of the Bible. It is akin to Dolores Williams's argument, in Sisters in the Wilderness, that her construction of Christian theology or god-talk is informed by the statement: "I am a black WOMAN." More specifically I propose to show how Filipino perspectives generated in resistance to imperialism and colonialism highlight certain aspects of the biblical texts and of their historical contexts that remain hidden when they are read from European-American perspectives. What I am proposing is another "Canaanite" reading that I am offering as a contribution to the developing archive of resistance and liberation discourses: a reading aimed to disrupt and challenge the hegemony of Western scholarship in biblical studies, especially in the Philippines.

As a decolonizing reading, Jeepney hermeneutics is but one among many such readings by and of the colonized. Two excellent examples are Musa Dube's and Robert Allen Warrior's interpretations. Dube is from Botswana and Warrior is Native American (Osage).

Musa Dube's postcolonial feminist interpretation of scripture presupposes the Bible as an imperialist text. In other words, imperialism is more than just a military, political, economic, and cultural exercise. It is more than just the "imposition of a few universal standards on a world of difference" (1998:233); it is a textual project. And the Bible is its most important text. Dube has analyzed the role of the Bible in empire-building, especially in Africa. She argues, for example in her readings of John's and Matthew's mission texts, that both gospels construct imperial agents as holy and acceptable and both pursue ideologies that authorize the cultural subjugation of foreign lands and people. How does one then read the Bible for Dube? She offers, "the biblical text becomes subordinated to the context, the culture, and the sociopolitical issues of readers, so that readers literally proceed to re-write the text" (239). She suggests reading other texts—like Mositi Torontle's *The Victims*, or the life experiences of the women of Botswana—that bear God's disclosure, saying that God never opened the Bible to us, yet we still hear God speaking to us as women and in our situations.

Robert Allen Warrior's essay, *Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians*, argues that the liberationist picture of Yahweh is incomplete. In the conquest narratives, Yahweh the liberator becomes Yahweh the conqueror. Warrior rightly points out that the obvious characters in the Exodus and Conquest narratives for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites, the people who already lived in the promised land. He also argues "that the Canaanites should be the center of theological reflection and political action. They are the last remaining ignored voice in the text, except perhaps for the land itself" (98). The conquest stories, for Warrior, with all their violence and injustice, must be taken seriously by those who believe in the God of the Old Testament. Unfortunately, biblical critics rarely mention these texts and when they do, Warrior points out, they express little concern for the indigenes and their rights as human beings and as nations. Especially ignored are the passages where Yahweh tells the Israelites to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population. He then notes that oppressive narratives of conquest, anti-Semitism, sexism, heterosexism, imperialism, and racism remain in the canonized text and opines: "We will perhaps do better to look elsewhere for our vision of justice, peace, and political sanity…" (100).

Reading the story of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 as a "Canaanite," Warrior argues that "the woman does not become a follower of Jesus.… Yes, she changes Jesus, but she does not become a disciple.… The question of what happened to her is left open.… Perhaps she later joined the church (if indeed she actually existed) or maybe she went back to her own people and fought against the colonizing Romans in her own way with her own gods" (102). Warrior adds: "The importance of the story is not whether she followed, but that without her… Jesus would have remained a narrow-minded bigot who viewed indigenous people as inhuman" (102).

"Reading the Bible inside a Jeepney" begins with one's view of the Bible. As Daniel Patte points out in conversation, "Traditional roles of scripture are problematic, when they involve submission to the text, or more exactly, defining the authority of the text in terms of moral prescriptions or vision (ideology, religious views, etc.) that it posits or

carries." Many interpreters of the Bible begin with the theological affirmation, explicit or not, that the Bible is "God's Word" and that it offers access to the Complete and Final Revelation of the One True God, Jesus Christ. Jeepney hermeneutics presupposes that the Bible is a "jeep," a sword, an imperializing text – a dangerous text, as demonstrated throughout history by the many horrendous crimes committed in its name (see for instance, Susanne Scholtz, ed. Biblical Studies Alternatively: An Introductory Reader [2002]).

Imperializing texts, according to Dube, take many forms and are written by a variety of people, even by the colonized, either collaborating with the dominant forces or yearning for the same power. She adds, "Regardless of who writes imperializing texts, they are characterized by literary constructions, representations, and uses that authorize taking possession of foreign spaces and peoples… Reproduction of imperial strategies of subjugation is also evident among many interpreters." I draw heavily from Dube's work with the following questions in explaining why the Bible is imperializing and why many of its interpretations are the same. (1) Does the text have an explicit stance for or against the political imperialism of its time? (2) Does it encourage travel to distant and inhabited lands and how does it justify itself? (3) How does the text construct difference: is there dialogue and liberating interdependence, or is there condemnation and replacement of all that is foreign? Is there celebration of difference authentic or mere tokenism? (4) Does the text employ representations (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, divine, etc.) to construct relationships of subordination and domination?

Jeepney hermeneutics as a decolonizing reading presupposes the reality of empire as backdrop to the construction of the biblical narratives. It does not equate the biblical narratives with historically verifiable facts. What it does is argue that most of the Bible is composed of discourses constructed and framed by a particular historical setting. For example, in the case of New Testament writings, they are framed by the Roman Imperial occupation. Anti-colonialist Franz Fanon and educator Paolo Freire show that dynamics leading to literary production exist not only between the colonizer and the

colonized, but also between various interest groups of the colonized, some of which try to gain power to define national cultural identity, as well as to compete for the attention of their collective oppressor. Jeepney hermeneutics argues that most of the biblical narratives are not rejecting the imperialism of its time but are seeking its favor, or at least condoning it. Again, the Bible is an imperializing text, that is, it has "in front of the text" features and tensions that reveal it as condoning and, consequently, promoting imperialism. It is a jeep, a sword, and Jeepney hermeneutics attempts to beat that jeep into a jeepney, that sword into a ploughshare.

Jeepney readings have at least three distinct characteristics, three explicit choices—textual, theological, and contextual—made by the reader in front of texts.

First, as far as textual choices are concerned, it involves reading texts by disregarding, setting aside, or resisting imperial rhetoric, its agents and those who mimic them (getting rid of the machine gun and its mount). This means privileging the "random aberrant outbursts in a world otherwise rigidly held together by its patriarchal attitudes and androcentric perspective" (Weems, 1991:76). This means privileging the subaltern in texts, not just the "voices from the margins" but also the "voiceless from the margins," like the ram in the Abraham-Isaac periscope in Genesis 22, what Leela Gandhi describes as "the ones who disappear because we never hear them speak. They only serve as medium for competing discourses to represent their claims." Like the pais in Matthew 8:5-13, and Onesimus in Paul's letter to Philemon. This fundamental choice, this switch of focus from center to periphery allows the marginalized in the text to "mirror" the plight of the marginalized in front of it. This is akin to Delores Williams' argument about the power of Hagar's story to inform and inspire the continuing struggle of many African-American women.

Identifying with the underdog and the marginalized is not uncommon among Filipinos. Most of them read comic books. They are the cheapest form of entertainment. Another Filipino favorite is the tele-novela (for those who have televisions) or radio serials (for the

majority who do not). Many identify with the pango, the pandak, and the negro characters in these stories because their struggles approximate or echo Philippine situations.

Filipinos love characters who, despite their dire situations, persist and resist. Even Filipino superheroes are not exempt from hardship. Kapten Barbel, for example, is a cripple who works as a scavenger. Darna is a blind Sampaguita vendor. Bullet Boy is a balut peddler. Unlike many Cinderella- like stories of heroes and heroines in the West, these Filipino superheroes start dirt poor and remain dirt poor. And many of them are children. Many of the silenced voices in the Bible are children (Melinda Grace Aoanan, 2001). As Mananzan has argued, most of its marginalized characters are women.

Filipino activists report that in the mid-70s, at the height of the US-sponsored Martial Law regime of Ferdinand Marcos, "Christ is the Answer" banners flooded Metro Manila. On one of these banners one wrote, in red ink, "What is the Question?"

A second characteristic of jeepney hermeneutics involves a fundamental theological claim that the insights, stories, and answers the Bible provide (like the three-seater jeep) are not enough and may even be wrong or hurtful for the questions being asked by many communities, thus the need to create space for other texts that help inform—not define—peoples' lives and struggles (therefore, the necessity of the twenty or more passenger jeepney). Jeepney hermeneutics creates space for other voices, for Filipino "traditions, myths, legends, to harness insights, values and inspiration towards the full flowering of communities and persons" (Mananzan, 1991:176-177). Jeepney hermeneutics then takes seriously the affirmation that God and God's activity is bigger than the Bible, and, yes, bigger than Christianity. God did not arrive in the Philippines in 1521. God was already here. According to Taylor: "The Bible, once the "sword" of the imperial spirit, will have to find its new possibilities amid many other spirits that its Christian bearers often spurned."

Edicio dela Torre's "apocryphal" readings push the boundaries of texts. For example, he engages the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-31) in conversation: What if the Samaritan arrived on the scene ten minutes earlier while the mugging was still ongoing, would he have helped? What if the Samaritan was on the scene even before the mugging started, would he have done anything to stop it from happening? What if that road from Jerusalem to Jericho was made safe so that anyone can come and go freely and safely? For Dela Torre, the normative readings of the Samaritan story—and similar stories—beg extrapolation, because unchallenged they perpetuate the cycle of institutionalized victimization. Someone is victimized. Someone comes to the rescue of the victim. Nothing is done so that the victimizers stop victimizing, victims stop being victimized, and rescuers stop coming at the end of the victimization. The cycles of violence need to be broken. To read from Dela Torre's perspective is to ask of the Bible: does it completely address Filipino life and struggles?

I have observed over and over again Filipino women resisting traditional readings of Luke 10:38-42 which recounts the encounter of Jesus with Mary and Martha in their home. It is not uncommon for many in rural congregations to act out Bible passages. In many instances, women have resisted the texts and played out what made sense for their particular experience. For example, I have observed alternative readings of Luke 10:38-42 where the people playing the characters of Mary, Martha, and Jesus did not follow the script: the three either prepared the meal together, sat on the floor together and engaged in dialogue, or went outside the house and played ball with the other disciples. Many have re-written the "script" so that Mary and Martha come out equal partners in ministry with Jesus. Rebecca Asedillo, in Women of Faith, talks about an ecumenical gathering where the women assert that: "Maybe what was best for Mary was best specifically for her... Sometimes we're Mary and sometimes we're Martha... Yes, Martha was practical. Mary was spiritual. We are both" (87- 88).

Native American and African readings resonate with the aforementioned pushing of textual boundaries. Jace Weaver argues

that Native American peoples, dispossessed of their homeland and annihilated by a foreign invader, emphatically call for de-colonizing the Gospel. Their perception of time, space, and nature, remarkably different from that of the West's, define their interpretation. For many of them basileia tou theou (the realm of God) is read in spatial not temporal terms, asking "Where?" and not "When?" They interpret Moses' trudging up Sinai as a vision quest. They recognize Mary, the mother of Jesus because she is White Buffalo Calf Woman, or Corn Mother, or La llorana refusing to be consoled at the death of her child (169-173). Musimbi Kanyoro points out that "even a 'woman's reading' of the Bible does not answer the questions that bother us. In the Martha and Mary stories (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1-44), we have found liberation in the affirmation by Jesus of Mary's desire for knowledge…. But what about Martha? A majority of women in Africa are Marthas" (108).

Kanyoro adds that women in the continent ask questions different from those in theological debate in general and in women's theology in particular. They ask about the Moabite Orpah's plight, a question even the Bible does not answer (105).

Third, jeepney hermeneutics as an example of "reading like a Canaanite" (Donaldson: 10; Weaver: 169), "re-invading the land" (Guardiola-Saenz), re-claiming stolen spaces, and building houses (jeepneys as Filipino homes on wheels) addresses contextual issues, concrete life settings among Filipinos. "The Canaanites are, of course, the much vilified people who occupied the 'promised land' before the arrival of the wandering Israelites. Yet they also stand in for all peoples whose lands have been conquered and expropriated" (Donaldson: 12).

Filipinos as one of the most colonized peoples in the world (Fernandez, 2001) are modern-day Canaanites. I have read reports that close to 80 percent of the country is controlled by transnational corporations (TNCs). Majority remain squatters in their own land. For the "homeless" Filipino in the Philippines whose bed was last night's cardboard box, tonight's underpass, and tomorrow's park bench, a jeepney ride, though fleeting, is the closest experience of being "at

home." Reading the Bible inside a jeepney simply means creating space, offering a home for Filipino "Canaanites" to think, to speak, to sing, to commune in Canaanite languages—in their own tongues. Bringing in Canaanite texts "decolonize the exclusively divine space assigned to biblical texts" (Dube, 1998b: 119). Moreover, for Dube, these Canaanite readings are "meant to contest, subvert, and decolonize the master's text by refusing to give it too much attention" (119).

There are members of the Faculty of Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines who believe that theological education in the 21st century must take seriously the challenge of Miriam and Aaron who asked, "Does the Lord speak only through Moses?" (Num 12:2), and thus also proclaim the stories of the marginalized, the subaltern, and, yes, the "Canaanites" in the text and those in front of it (44).

A reading of Romans through the Filipino value of utang na loob (debt of the heart) might bear little or no connection to the epistle's rhetoric, yet it is a reading that creates space for Filipinos (Velunta, 1998). Melanio Aoanan's teolohiya ng pagkain at bituka (intestinal theology) is built on Sikolohiyang Pilipino's insistence on using the vernacular and thus uses sociologically-loaded terms like "katawan" (for body) and "kapatid" (for brother/sister) that makes excellent sense to Filipinos. Melinda Grace Aoanan reads Jonah from the perspective of the one hundred twenty thousand innocent Nineveh children. Asedillo reads Mark 7:24-30/Matthew 15:21-28 from the perspective of the "little bitch," the Syrophoenician/ Canaanite woman who "catches Jesus with his compassion down" and who eventually, through her challenge, leads Jesus to a change of mind and heart (75-76). Reading Matthew 8:5-13 from the perspective of the pais, the child servant, instead of focusing on Jesus and/or the centurion challenges both Matthew's rhetoric and traditional readings of the pericope (Velunta, 2000).

INVITATION

As representative of perspectives generated in resistance to imperialism and colonialism, Jeepney hermeneutics celebrates alternative rituals and Filipino reading practices, aimed to disrupt the colonial mind-set and the hegemony of Western scholarship and interpretation.

As an explicitly decolonizing reading practice, Jeepney hermeneutics is not about offering a single, best interpretation. What it does is argue that there are other ways of reading texts by highlighting aspects traditional Western scholarship has ignored or continues to ignore. And this particular alternative reading is grounded on three elements: privileging the subaltern in texts; presupposing Scripture as informing life, not defining it; and reading texts as "Canaanites." Jeepney hermeneutics is one of those readings that, according to Sugirtharajah, "enable us to question the totalizing tendencies of European-American reading practices and interpret the texts on our own terms and read them from our specific locations" (1998b: 16).

Recall those two monuments in Mactan. They serve as testament to the reality that there are several ways to tell a story, and there are multitudes of storytellers. There are other ways of reading. And readers? There are legion.

Many of them are Filipinos.

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Reading Matthew inside a Jeepney
(from Daniel Patte, Justin Ukpong, Monya Stubbs, and Revelation Velunta, The Gospel of Matthew: A Contextual Introduction for Group Study [Nashville: Abingdon, 2003])

The Life Context: Jeeps and Jeepneys

Biblical interpretation has privileged the centers of power within, behind, and in front of the text. Biblical studies in the Philippines have been a stronghold of colonial scholarship for over a century, especially among Protestant churches. Indigenous denominations refuse to become autonomous and continue to depend on their mother institutions in the United States or elsewhere in the First World. Church buildings and institutions are named after benevolent foreign church leaders and missionaries. Seminaries continue to have more foreign teachers (who are paid in dollars by foreign boards) than Filipinos (who are paid in pesos and, usually, significantly below the living wage).

Libraries are filled with books written by European and American scholars and continue to receive donations of old books from the First World. Traditional historical-critical methods remain the key reading paradigm. Establishing what the Bible meant in the past is the first step toward discerning what it means today. Ways of interpreting the Bible that do not follow this so-called fundamental paradigm are labeled eisegesis (reading into the text) or reader-response. Filipino Protestants know more about Bible history and American history than their own history; and they read the Bible the way their colonial masters did and still do, because they have been socialized for generations that this is the correct way. Filipino social scientists call this collective condition of the Filipino psyche a colonial mentality. Historian Renato Constantino traces it to the systematic mis-education of Filipinos. Theologian Eleazar Fernandez argues that the Philippines can still be called a "mental colony" of the United States of America. Biblical studies in the Philippines today exemplify his claim.

But side by side with this "reading-the-Bible-the-way-our-masters-do" is a wealth of Filipino literature, practices, and reading strategies that

engage the Bible in unexpected ways. I call these interpretations models of jeepney hermeneutics. The jeepney is the most popular mode of public transportation in the Philippines. It is an excellent example of the Filipinization of an American icon, the military jeep. It is also, as I will argue, one very powerful metaphor for Filipinos' engagement with another icon, the Bible, offering a range of strategies to decolonize biblical studies.

The U.S. Army, back in 1940, required an all-terrain reconnaissance, go-anywhere, vehicle that seated three and had a mount for a 30-caliber machine gun. Filipinos have turned this military vehicle into a sort of mini-bus that can accommodate about twenty people. There are those who look at a jeepney and call it Frankenstein's monster. There are others who see it as a "Filipino home on wheels," complete with an altar. The military jeep was, and still is, a sort of imperializing text. A jeepney resists this text.

Theological Issues Arising from This Life Context: Reading Matthew Inside a Jeepney

Interpretation, by definition, is always perspectival and particular. In other words, everything—including the supposedly objective historical-critical method—is reader-response. It is implicitly a scriptural reading that needs to be assessed by scriptural criticism. This interpretation of Matthew as an imperializing text presupposes the reality of an empire (the Roman Empire—the contemporary empire perceived as a reality by the biblical colonized people) as a backdrop to the construction of the narrative. Many Filipinos employ a similar assumption when engaging Filipino resistance literature: for example, Jose Rizal's Noli Me Tangere and El Filibusterismo, Francisco Baltazar's Florante at Laura, and Carlos Bulosan's America Is in the Heart.

This interpretation does not equate the Gospel of Matthew with historical facts. What it does is argue that the Gospel is constructed and framed by a particular historical setting, in this case the Roman imperial occupation.1 Anticolonialist Frantz Fanon and educator Paolo Freire show that dynamics leading to literary production exist not only

between the colonizer and the colonized, but also between various interest groups of the colonized, some of which try to gain power to define national cultural identity, as well as to compete for the attention of their collective oppressor. The interpretation below argues that Matthew is not rejecting Roman imperialism, but seeking its favor, or at least condoning it.
This interpretation also presupposes resistance, as reflected in what activist Salud Algabre and historian Reynaldo Ileto call "little traditions." Algabre and Ileto memorialize all those resistance fighters who have been victimized by the violence of institutionalized forgetting, a fate most of the unnamed children in Matthew share.

Textual and Theological Choices: Matthew, Empire, and the Pais

New Testament scholar Musa Dube posits the following questions in order to measure whether Matthew is an imperializing text: Does the text offer an explicit stance for or against Roman imperialism? Does the narrative encourage travel to distant and inhabited lands, and how does it justify such travel? How does the narrative present those who are different from the main characters? Is there dialogue and liberating interdependence between the main characters and "others"? Or is there condemnation and replacement of all that is foreign and other? Is the celebration of difference authentic or mere tokenism? Does the text present relationships of subordination and domination? How does it represent them?

Using these questions to analyze Matthew and its effects upon its readers, Dube concludes that the author's stance toward the imperial powers presents imperial rule and its agents as holy and acceptable. Matthew's Jesus is politically unsubversive and encourages travel to distant and inhabited lands. Matthew's positive presentation of the Empire and the decision to take the word to the nations (Matt. 28:16-20) is born within and as a result of stiff competition for power over the crowds (Israel) and the favor of the Empire. Matthew's mission to the nations embodies imperialistic values and strategies. Matthew does not seek relationships of liberating interdependence among nations, cultures, and genders. Rather, this Gospel upholds the

superiority of some races and relegates other races to inferiority. Matthew represents gender relationships as relationships of subordination and domination by featuring the Canaanite woman (15:21-28) and the centurion (8:5-13) in contrasting stories, which foreshadows the mission to the nations.

Matthew's presentation of Pilate, his wife, and the Roman soldiers at the trial, death, and resurrection of Jesus shows a clear-cut pro-empire position (27:1–28:15).
The encounter between the centurion and Jesus, according to Dube, particularly highlights Matthew's stance toward the Empire. Both men are presented as having authority to effect things simply by the power of their words (Matt. 8:8-9). The comparison of Jesus' authority with that of the centurion's has the effect of sanctifying the imperial power. Jesus pronounces the centurion's faith greater than the faith of everyone in Israel (Matt. 8:10), a statement that contrasts the imperial agent with the colonized and exalts his righteousness above theirs. The passage casts imperial officials as holier and predicts that they, and other groups, will have more power (in the kingdom of God). Such characterization not only disguises what imperial agents represent—institutions of exploitation and oppression—but also pronounces imperialism holy and acceptable.

A quick survey of the history of the interpretation of Matthew and centuries of Western colonization—euphemistically called "civilizing missions"—in Asia, Africa, and Latin America shows that most interpreters followed the Gospel's imperial rhetoric.

The centurion is to Matthew as the 30-caliber machine gun mount is to the military jeep. To read Matthew inside a jeepney is to celebrate the fact that the first thing Filipinos did in their transformation of the military jeep was to rid it of that machine gun mount. To read Matthew inside a jeepney is to remove our gaze from the centurion—and even Jesus, who mimics the centurion—and focus it on someone else. I suggest focusing our attention on the servant (pais in Greek) of 8:5-13.

The pais, whether translated son, daughter, girl, boy, servant, slave, or sex slave, is a child. He or she serves to remind flesh and blood readers that the reality of empire—in varying forms and degrees—is experienced by children and by those who are treated as children. Political sociologist Ashis Nandy draws attention to the way the colonized are viewed as children by the colonizers.2

Fred Atkinson, the first American General Superintendent of Education in the Philippines, inaugurated more than a century of racist public education in the islands when he remarked that "the Filipino people, taken as a body, are children and childlike, do not know what is best for them. . . By the very fact of our superiority of civilization and our greater capacity for industrial activity we are bound to exercise over them a profound social influence."3

The pais reminds flesh and blood readers that children's oppression—of varying forms and degrees—is written in the text because, despite the rhetoric that God's reign is for children (Matt. 19:14), no child is ever named—except Jesus—or is given a voice in the gospel—except Herodias's daughter, who says what her mother tells her to say. Like the Canaanite woman's daughter (15:21-28) and the pais, Herodias's daughter serves only as a medium through which competing discourses pre- sent their claims. The girl falls prey to manipulation by her mother and by Herod. We don't even get to hear the cries of the children who are massacred in 2:18, only their mothers' cries. Children are the primary victims of Matthew's "culture of silence."

Look at how the pais is described in Greek: ho pais mou, "the servant who is mine." That child's body is under somebody else's control—whether it's his father, his owner, or, as I have argued elsewhere, his pedophile. The centurion's act on the pais's behalf emphasizes the latter's marginalization. As far as Matthew is concerned, the pais cannot speak or seek his own healing. Yet, because that child is "paralyzed," albeit momentarily, he also paralyzes his owner, who must seek help from Jesus. The child also interrupts the goings and the comings of the centurion's soldiers, since the centurion is not with

them to give them orders (Matt. 8:9). Thus, with his paralysis, the child also interrupts the imperial expansion.

Throughout the Gospel, characters come and go, borders are crossed: magi from the East come seeking the king of the Jews (2:1-12); Joseph and his family flee into Egypt (2:13-15); Herod sends his death squads to Bethlehem to murder children (2:16-18); Joseph and his family go to Nazareth, from Egypt (2:19-23); Jesus goes to John the baptizer and is led by the Spirit into the wilderness (3:1–4:11); Jesus leaves Nazareth and makes his home in Capernaum (4:12); the centurion comes to Jesus and the latter is convinced of the imperial authority that effects goings and comings, travel to distant lands, and control at a distance (8:5-13). The disciples are systematically prepared for their commissioning (10:1-42); the Canaanite woman comes to Jesus (15:21-28); the heavy-laden come to Jesus (11:28). Jesus eventually sends out his disciples (28:16-20). Everyone in the story moves, except the pais in Matthew 8:5-13. Yes, even for a brief moment, the pais revels in the space her paralysis brings. For about eight short verses in the very long 28 chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, the pais is free of the centurion. The colonized is free of her colonizer.

Revisiting the Life Context: The Pais, Jeepneys, and Filipinos

The majority of Filipinos remain colonized subjects, a part of a mental colony. Migrant Filipina domestic workers, numbering over 15 million, are the global servants of late capitalism. Tens of millions find themselves squatters in their own homeland. Those who have opted for "the Promise Land"—the United States—find themselves treated as second-class citizens. Yet, despite all this colonization, they have always resisted. The jeepney is the best-known symbol of resistance and decolonization for Filipinos. Now, because of the Gospel, they have another symbol, the pais who disrupts imperial progress, even if only briefly, in the Gospel of Matthew.

Notes:

1. The Gospel of Matthew is a narrative discourse constructed under Roman imperial occupation. In other words, it is a story from a people making sense of a century of foreign domination and exploitation.
2. See Leela Gandhi, Postcolonial Theory (New York: 1998), 32.
3. Quoted in Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen Rosskamm Philippines Reader: A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Resistance (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 12.

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