
New Treasures and Old: Afro-futurism and the Parables of Jesus

A sermon by the Reverend Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 12 – Year A

This summer, after 30 years of my career as a professor, some of our younger scholars finally told me about Afro-futurism. That's right: 'Afro-futurism' they call it. It's an amazing term isn't it? The word was coined in the early 1990s, about the same time that I became a tenured professor here in Atlanta at Emory University. And to think that, in the 20 years since then, no one even hinted to me that there was such a thing!

It reminds me of that line from the film classic, *Casablanca*, starring Humphrey Bogart. You remember the scene where the French captain stages a police raid on Rick's American café. He bursts into the room and declares, "I'm shocked, shocked! There's gambling going in here." Oh well, that was tongue-in-cheek. But I'm "shocked, shocked," or at least I'm chagrined, that after all the work I've done in black studies and black theology I never heard that there was such a thing as Afro-futurism. I even chaired our African American Studies department one year!

But finally, finally that I know about it, like a good scholar let me share with you a definition that you can find on the internet, in an online encyclopedia. Consider this definition:

Afrofuturism is an emergent literary and cultural aesthetic that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western cosmologies in order to critique not only the present-day dilemmas of people of color, but also to revise, interrogate, and re-examine the historical events of the past. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afrofuturism>

Notice right away this interesting feature of that definition: although the word, "Afrofuturism," contains the word, "future," the definition itself makes no direct reference to the future. Sure, there's an indirect connection to the future with the reference to science fiction. But the main focus is 'to critique not only the present but also revise, interrogate, and re-examine the past.' And here right, speaking of 'revising, interrogating, and re-examining the past'—here I want to share with you a stunning example of Afro-futurism that has fascinated me all week; all week as I reflected on our scriptures appointed for today.

The legend is that some African ancestors were so advanced in their traditional spirituality that they could agree to endure the Atlantic slave trade, with its horrific Middle Passage, in order to accompany their people and influence its outcome. Of course they may not have known the particular details of the trauma and atrocities they would suffer. And eventually they would be severed from the communities with its resources that had formerly sustained them and that now sent them out. But like many prophetic figures in the Bible, they had the spiritual insight to be able to agree to do what they were called and commissioned to do. And the evidence of history among their descendants confirms that they carried within their souls the wisdom and expertise of their spiritual disciplines and traditions.

To encapsulate all this, here's the quotation that was shared with me, and that expresses that legend in one short phrase: "Many were taken, but some were sent." I repeat: "Many were taken, but some were sent." Moreover, here's a commentary that I was given to expound and explore the legend that *some were sent*. "What if," the commentary asks—

What if the Ancestors intended some other purpose for us to have been brought to this part of the world, entirely apart from the European lust for profit? . . . Just asking that question puts us in a different position and releases a tremendous amount of energy . . . [energy] to contain the experience so that we can benefit from the memory rather than being crushed by it.

(M. NourbeSe Philip being interviewed by Patricia Saunders in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, June 2008, pp. 69-70; as reported by Maria E. Hamilton Abegunde; maehamil@indiana.edu; <http://abegunde.edu> | <http://iub.academia.edu/MariaHamiltonAbegunde>).

So that's the Afro-futurist legend that I learned this summer: the legend that some of our Ancestors were sent or for "some other purpose" and were 'brought to this part of the world entirely apart from the lust for profit.' And now, right here: right here we may ask the question, 'What could that purpose be—a purpose operating entirely apart from other purposes; other purposes that entail trauma and tribulation?' And right here our scriptures appointed for today offer some biblical answers; answers that flow spiritually from the parables of Jesus.

The first scripture is one of Jesus' most familiar and most discussed parables. "The kingdom of heaven," he declares:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches" (Matthew 13.31-32).

Now that parable appointed for today is Jesus' Parable of the Mustard Seed. But all this month we've been listening to Jesus' other seed parables: his famous Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds (called in the King James Version, the Wheat and the Tares). All three of these seed parables are found in Matthew's gospel, chapter 13. But elsewhere, in John's gospel, chapter 12, Jesus describes *himself* symbolically as a "seed"—as a seed that must first die in order to germinate and produce abundantly:

"Very truly, I tell you [Jesus said], unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die (John 12.24, 32-33).

Here, in this parabolic declaration, Jesus makes a clear connection between the abundance that a seed can produce and the reality that it must first die in order to 'bear much fruit.' In this way, as in all the parables, he offers a striking picture of what the kingdom of heaven or the reign of God is like—and what we will be like if we choose to participate in that kingdom or reign of God. To repeat: in John's gospel Jesus describes himself symbolically as a "seed"—as a seed that must first die in order to germinate and produce abundantly. It's that spirituality of his passion and death that connects with the abundance produced by the mustard seed in today's parable, where from a tiny seed it grows into "the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree" (Matthew 13.32). In John's version of this spiritual principle, "if [the seed] dies, it bears much fruit;"

And it's that same principle of death and dying that we hear echoed in our other scripture appointed for today, the passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans. For that same principle corresponds to the early history of our Christian church—the experience of being persecuted and scapegoated; the experience of death and dying. "As it is written," the apostle wrote, quoting the Book of Psalms:

As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

But "No!" he added in his own words.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8.36-37).

"More than conquerors," the apostle declares! Can we believe that? Is it credible? Can we credit the apostolic claim that despite persecution, scapegoating and death—that is, being "accounted as sheep to be slaughtered"—that despite all that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us?" Is there really so great a love—so great a love available anywhere in human experience, that it can trump or triumph over the real trauma and atrocities of persecution, scapegoating and death?

That's the question of faith, of course, the faith of the early church on the one hand. It's also a question that arises from our Afro-futurist legend, on the other hand—the legend that some were not just taken from the homeland but rather were sent. But finally—on the third hand so to speak, just to lighten things up a bit with an absurd image: on the third hand it's about our faith today. That's where the real question of faith always arises, of course. It's not just about the faith of our forebears or ancestors or those heroes of faith. Their faith is always a challenge or inspiration to foster and empower our own faith journey.

And so all of our texts assembled here today, biblical and cultural, gospel and secular, parable and Afro-futurist—all of them are lining up; aligning to interrogate us here in the present, to critique and challenge us. The challenge becomes more compelling if we revise that Afro-futurist legend into the present tense: instead of the phrase, “many were taken, but some were sent,” let us hear instead for us today: ‘many *are* taken, but some *are* sent.’

Now for us Christians that phrase immediately recalls our biblical word for “apostle;” it means, *one who is sent*. An apostle is one who is sent and an “epistle” is the message or a letter that is sent—as in the apostle Paul’s epistles or letters. Indeed, in that connection Paul wrote to his church community in ancient Corinth:

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3.2-3).

Precisely here, sisters and brothers of every cultural and religious persuasion—or no persuasion at all; precisely here we are all called and sent to be ourselves a living message, as St. Paul put it; a letter “to be known and read by all.” If we embrace a Christian call and commission, then it is to be such a “letter of Christ” that he becomes the firstborn among us—among us who are so “conformed” to his image that we serve with him “within a large family” (Romans 8.29).

It's that “large family” of Christ-like ‘brothers and sisters’ that Jesus evokes in his Parable of the Mustard Seed, where he says symbolically that ‘it has grown into the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches’ (Matthew 13.32).

But here both Christians and Afro-futurists alike can find fulfillment in these concluding images from Jesus’ parables featured today. For both Christians and Afro-futurists alike are being asked to recall an original commission. In each case it is a commission not simply to endure death and persecution but to germinate and shelter a “large family” of brothers and sisters who triumph over and flourish beyond death and persecution— again, as Jesus said, ‘so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches’ (Matthew 13.32)

And both Christians and Afro-futurists alike are being asked to recall not only an ancient commission but a treasured prize as the goal of that commission— again, as Jesus said, because:

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field . . .

And both Christians and Afro-futurists alike are being asked to recall not only an ancient commission but a treasured prize as the goal of that commission— again, as Jesus said, because:

“the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls . . .

And both Christians and Afro-futurists alike are being asked to recall not only an ancient commission but a treasured prize as the goal of that commission— again, as Jesus said, because:

“the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind . . .

But finally Jesus asked his listeners,

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13.44, 45, 47, 52).

Christian friends and Afro-futurists alike, let us also become like ‘scribes who have been trained for the kingdom,’ and as

masters' of 'households' both ancient and contemporary, let us fulfill the commission that we and our predecessors were sent out to do and thus bring out of our treasures what is old and what is new.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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