

Engaging the Future of Theological Education: Challenge or Promise

Excerpts from Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago Commencement Address 5/16/2021

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³And he (Jesus) told them many things in parables saying:
“Listen! A sower went out to sow... ³Let anyone with ears
to hear listen!”¹

Some time ago I was invited to preach at the service of installation of the Rev. Dr. Javier (Jay) as a teaching theologian at the Lutheran Seminary Program in the Southwest in Austin, Texas. For the homily, I chose Jesus’ parable of **the Sower** which we find in Matt 13:1–23, Mark 4:1–20, Luke 8:4–15, and the Gospel of Thomas, logion 9.² I have always found this story to be a great foundation for our Christian witness.

The parable has an intriguing beginning:

³And he (Jesus) told them many things in parables saying:
“Listen! A sower went out to sow...”

The point of the parable lies in the contrast between the mixed results that the beginning of the work brings forth, and the astonishingly fruitful outcome in the harvest. The parable is an encouragement by Jesus to his followers, warning them that much of their work in proclaiming the coming of God’s reign may seem like a wasted effort, but promising them that God will bring forth results far exceeding their expectations.³

While it would be too presumptuous for me to claim to represent Jesus at this commencement ceremony, I do want to appeal to you in this important threshold in your life, to think of this story as a biblical foundation for what I have to say about the challenges and promise of theological education for those called and willing to engage in the various ministries of the church.

1. Matt 13:1–23 from *The People’s Bible*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 1426.

2. [The parable of the sower - Bing](#).

3. *The Interpreters One-Volume Commentary of the Bible*. Edited by Charles M. Laymon (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 625.

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Theological education between the times

In preparation for this occasion, I’ve been reading some books in an interesting series of studies about theological education bearing the title, *Theological Education Between the Times*.⁴ The title seems very appropriate because in recent times we have been facing a worldwide challenge in the area of theological education. In one of the books of this series Daniel O. Aleshire,⁵ a former executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, provides both, 1) a helpful historical survey of its history starting in 1636 with the establishment of Harvard college as the first North American institution of higher education,⁶ as well as 2) a number of

4. Other recent important publications on this topic are, *Locating US Theological Education in a Global Context: Conversations with American Higher Education*, ed. Hendrik R. Pieterse (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019) and *Looking Forward with Hope: Reflections on the Present State and Future of Theological Education*, ed. Benjamin Valentin (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019).

5. Daniel O. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession: The Next Future of Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021).

6. According to Aleshire, the founding of Harvard College (1636), the College of William and Mary in Virginia (1693), Yale in New England (1701) and, Princeton in New Jersey (1746) were the early expressions of higher education in North America, instituted by religious bodies, with educational goals to prepare individuals for employment in civil or religious service. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 31–32. Aleshire notes that not all Protestant ministers received their education in these fledgling institutions. For some, which he considers to be the majority of them, their education was gained by apprenticing

significant challenges theological education has had to confront throughout its history. Most of these challenges are well known, for we all have been part of this history: a) a decline in the percentage of North Americans claiming a religious preference; b) the closing of theological schools; c) merging with other institutions of higher learning; d) the increase in student indebtedness; e) strong competition for prospective students; and last but not least, f) the fact that money for this specific venture is harder to find.⁷

While other authors in this series lift up additional important concerns that need to be urgently addressed,⁸ they seem to agree with Aleshire's contention that the future of theological education lies in moving from a "professional model"⁹ that dominated after WWII, to one characteristic of its origin of "formation." This notion of "formation," returns theological education to an experience of a deep, abiding, resilient, generative identity as Christian human beings that is fostered within Christian leaders, in preparation to carry out this vocational call, not only in the context of the church's ministry, but also within the social, cultural, and public arena. In providing a specific definition of formation,

with more experienced ministers, or by reading texts like those assigned by the early Methodist circuit riders, or simply by studying the Bible as they preached it. In the nineteenth century the formal education for ministers gradually moved away from colleges to specialized theological schools, what we call "divinity schools." In 1808 the first free standing seminary was founded in Massachusetts, Andover Newton, by Congregationalists who opposed the appointment of a Unitarian-leaning professor to the Hollis Chair at Harvard (the oldest endowed chair in North American higher education). Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 33.

7. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 8-10.

8. Willie James Jennings points to the distortion characterizing western education for centuries, a predisposition woven into theological institutions and andragogical impulses: the image of a White self-sufficient man, his self-sufficiency defined by possession, control, and mastery. See, Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 5-9. For Chloe T. Sun the challenge comes from the neglected voices of people from the diaspora dwelling at the periphery of the main narratives of the West in North America. See, Chloe T. Sun, *Attempt Great Things for God: Theological Education in Diaspora* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 1-7. For Amos Yong, following the leads of North American political commentator Thomas L. Friedman, Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells, and the Israeli-American Berkman Professor of Entrepreneurial Legal Studies at Harvard Law School, Yochai Benkler, this challenge is posed by the diversifying post-Christian and postcolonial world characterizing our twenty-first century defying the nature of ecclesiality of institutions of theological education. See, Amos Yong, *Renewing the Church by the Spirit: Theological Education After Pentecost* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 1-5. Mark D. Jordan focuses on the practice of teaching asking whether Schleiermacher's conception of theology as a positive science (*Wissenschaft*) needs to exclude many traditional notions about Christian teaching as a more adequate mode for educational practice. See, Mark D. Jordan, *Transforming Fire: Imagining Christian Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

9. In describing this model Aleshire claims that "it provided the education needed for ministers to assume their role among other professionals who functioned in an ever more complicated and sophisticated society. It fit the increasingly sophisticated demands of ministry, the increasingly bureaucratic structures of denominations, and the cultural status of the church." Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 36.

To be sure, this concept of "formation" is a critically needed approach as we experience in our daily life challenges such as a world-wide pandemic, the shaking of the foundations of our social and political institutions, and last but not least, the need to modify the practice of some—not all but a number of—representatives of a law enforcement agency.

Aleshire notes:

The goal of theological education should be the development of a *wisdom of God and the ways of God, fashioned from intellectual, affective, and behavioral understanding and evidenced by spiritual and moral maturity, relational integrity, knowledge of the Scripture and tradition, and the capacity to exercise religious leadership.* This definition is an awkward and technical effort to get at something that is far more ineffable. The awkward and technical aspects can be elaborated while the ineffable aspects can only be respected and affirmed.¹⁰

To be sure, this concept of "formation" is a critically needed approach as we experience in our daily life challenges such as a world-wide pandemic, the shaking of the foundations of our social and political institutions, and last but not least, the need to modify the practice of some—not all but a number of—representatives of a law enforcement agency heavily tilted against people of color in this country. Some recent examples of this condition are the large number of people of color who, like George Floyd or Adam Toledo, have been arrested or killed by police officers who, after investigations and court procedures, have been suspended or discharged from their law enforcement position, convicted, and consigned to jail sentences. Former police officers who, while facing the consequences of their unprofessional conduct, also deserve our ministry of concern and compassion.

In search of new leadership for Christian ministry

If turning to "formation" in facing the challenges confronting theological education is a necessary approach in our efforts to

10. Aleshire, *Beyond Profession*, 82.

address them, another important task in this venture is to explore the present needs for Christian leadership. A great deal of change has taken place since the seventeenth century when schools of higher education were first instituted in North America by religious bodies with educational goals to prepare individuals for employment in civil and religious service. To address this specific task, the administration of LSTC, with the gracious contribution of one of our donors (John Damm), has intentionally incorporated in its present strategic plan a search for a position in the area of leadership. An advisory committee constituted by academic, religious, multi-ethnic, and a diversity of gender representatives has been at work since the beginning of the spring term, examining the needs and definition of leadership for today.

A treasured product of this process has been the opportunity to classify leadership traits into qualities of leadership formation, from those that may be considered grounding or fundamental (character formation, charisma, etc.), to others that may be considered desired (skills and capacities that a person should be able to practice anywhere). While still others are those that may be considered contextual—a specific ability or skill a person may demonstrate in specific settings (for example, abilities, practices, and language to resist oppression and seek equity).

As a result of our work, we are pleased to report that coming this fall, the seminary will be well-positioned to initiate a search for a position in leadership. This is very valuable work to be sure—work for which we are enormously grateful.

A Latinx perspective on theological education

We are moving away from a theological education paradigm where the dominant expression of identity and culture had to fit everyone. We are now recognizing the diversity of creation, but still trying to fit it all under the same traditional paradigm. We need a new paradigm that not only recognizes our diversity of expression but allows it to flourish as God intended. Here are perhaps, some fresh ways of looking at theological education through the lens of the Latinx community.

Recently, a number of Latinx authors have been occupied with the topic of theological education.¹¹ However, no one has embraced the description of this topic better than Justo L. González in his

11. See, Luis Rodríguez Rivera, “Globalizing the Campus: Implications for Theological Schools,” in *Locating Theological Education in a Global Context: Conversations with American Higher Education*, edited by Hendrik R. Pieterse (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019), 57-80. Also, Benjamín Valentín, “Embracing a Greater, Higher Calling: Redefining the Mission and Purpose of the Freestanding Protestant Seminary,” in *Looking Forward with Hope: Reflections on the Present State and Future of Theological Education*, edited by Benjamín Valentín (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019), 43-67. Likewise, Carmen Nanko-Fernández, “Theological Education Needs More than a Splash of Ethnic Color,” *Theological education needs more than a splash of ethnic color* | National Catholic Reporter (ncronline.org). Luis N. Rivera Pagán, “Perspectiva teológica sobre la crisis en Puerto Rico: Algunos desafíos,” en Ángel Rosa Vélez, editor, *Otros caminos. Propuestas para la crisis de Puerto Rico: Una fe que busca entendimiento* (San Juan: Editorial Isla Negra, 2012), 167.

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book, *The History of Theological Education*.¹² After presenting a synopsis of the history of theological education from its origin in the Early Church to the present, he proceeds to suggest various proposals to address today’s challenges and future opportunities for a more effective approach at this task.¹³ In a later article he summarizes his proposals by raising two important issues. First, one that relates to seminaries and centers of theological education. González states the need to acknowledge, that the majority of Protestant pastors and other leaders for church ministries in the United States today, do not receive their theological education from seminaries or higher learning accredited schools, but from Bible institutes and similar institutions. Second, and most importantly, that theological education is not a “one-shot deal.” He is persuaded that theological education is a continuum that begins in catechism class and Sunday school, and continues throughout the life of every believer, supported and reinforced in worship. This continuum includes—but is not restricted to—particular forms of educational opportunities for those who are called to lead the church in pastoral and other ministerial functions on behalf of the Christian community. For this type of theological education, he suggests a metaphor: that of “an irrigation hose.”

The image of the irrigation hose makes it clear that the primary purpose of theological education is not to create outstanding scholars in the field of religion, although we do need such scholars. The primary purpose of theological education is to help each believer irrigate the land where she or he happens to be. Those who do not go beyond Sunday school, if they irrigate the land around them, are just as valuable as those who teach in a seminary or school of theology. And those who teach in such institutions are to be valued on the basis of how well they irrigate the land in which they have been placed.

12. Justo L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015). See also the article by Benjamin D. Wayman, “Imagining the Future of Theological Education: Conversations with Rowan Williams, Justo González, Emilie Townes, and Sam Wells,” in *The Christian Century* (February 10, 2021).

13. González, *The History of Theological Education*, 138-139.

This shift in metaphors has drastic consequences for the way we organize theological education, from local churches to graduate schools.¹⁴

My personal inclination in addressing this topic is to join González and other theologians and religious leaders from different ethnic perspectives in their optimism about the future of theological education. My assessment emerges from my experience of close to forty years as a teaching theologian in the ELCA, my pastoral practice in congregational ministry since 1975, and my six years of missionary engagement in Argentina, first as the son of a teaching theologian at the Facultad Luterana de Teología in José C. Paz, and later as Rector (President) of the University Institute ISEDET in Buenos Aires, a teaching theologian at the university, and an assistant pastor of a local congregation. This experience has led me to believe in the need of developing a new paradigm for a better understanding and response to the present and future challenges in theological education.

Latin American background for informing the transition from a traditional model of theological education to a Latinx paradigm

Until a few years ago, mainline Protestant churches in Latin America were recognized for their efforts in establishing the most prestigious and relevant programs of theological education following the liberating fervor awakened by Latin American movements during the 1970s. The reason for these programs may be explained by the fact that this sector of the Christian church had the least difficulty in responding to the challenges of the academic and “scientific” demands of theological reflection. Yet this traditional model is experiencing a great transformation. It is worth mentioning that in the Latin American context a number of charismatic and Pentecostal groups have not only become aware of this transformation, but have also responded positively to it.¹⁵ A good example of this trend are the papers presented at the 1st Cumbre Internacional de Educadores Latinoamericanos (March 5 – 9, 2001, in Ecuador), in which Pentecostal leaders gathered to explore the challenges faced by theological education and church mission in the twenty-first century.¹⁶

This same transformation, yet within a broader variety of perspectives, was expressed at the 7th Jornada Teológica de la

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Comunidad de Educación Teológica Ecuémica Latinoamericana Y Caribeña (CETELA) held in La Paz, Bolivia, in July 2003.¹⁷ With great persuasion the prestigious Spanish theologian Juan José Tamayo made evident this transformation in a lecture where he argued for a new paradigm beginning to arise in Latin American theology, in its awakening to the plurality of voices and new challenges with which its social, political, religious and cultural reality confronts it.

Latin American liberation theology is opening itself to new horizons, taking as a locus new faces, emerging subjects, novel levels of consciousness, and fresh challenges brought about by our present reality: nature, land, women, Afro-Latin Americans, indigenous people, peasants, the excluded-always more numerous-by Neo-liberalist policies, etc. This condition generates deep changes in the paradigm that began to develop four decades ago.¹⁸

Already at this meeting, Matthias Preiswerk anticipated the need to take seriously the notion of *interculturality* to crystalize a new paradigm to provide an epistemological framework for the diversity expressed by Jose Tamayo in his presentation.¹⁹ A few years later, Preiswerk presented a more sophisticated analysis of this proposal. After developing a meticulous description of what he considers the present crisis in theological reflection/formation in the Caribbean and Latin America, he proposed recasting this perspective with that which Raúl Fornet-Betancourt calls the *intercultural paradigm*.²⁰

14. González, “There’s no theological education pipeline anymore: It’s been replaced by a thriving irrigation hose,” in *The Christian Century*, (December 30, 2020).

15. Matthias Preiswerk, *Contrato intercultural: Crisis y refundación de la educación teológica* (La Paz: Editores CLAI Sinodal, Universidad Carlos III, 2011), 41-108.

16. David E. Ramírez, editor, *Educación teológica y misión hacia el siglo XXI: 1ra Cumbre de la Fraternidad Internacional de Educadores Latinoamericanos (FIEL)* (Quito: Ediciones FLEREC-SEMISUD), 202. For the topic we are examining in this study, see Dr. Miguel Alvarez’s interesting contribution, *Los desafíos académicos del movimiento Pentecostal Latinoamericano en el siglo XXI*. Ramírez, *Educación teológica y misión hacia el siglo XXI*, 170-195.

17. Amílcar Ulloa, editor, *Teologías de Abya-Yala y formación teológica: interacciones y desafíos* (Bogotá: Editorial Kimpres Ltda., 2004).

18. Ulloa, *Teologías de Abya-Yala y formación teológica*, 87, (Translation mine).

19. Matthias Preiswerk, “Hacia una educación teológica intercultural,” in Ulloa, *Teologías de Abya-Yala y formación teológica*, 55-84.

20. Raúl Fornet-Betancourt was born in 1946 Holguin

Here we can see Matthias Preiswerk's decisive gamble for the innovating, prophetic, and liberating spirit that stirs the intercultural paradigm by pointing out with concrete features the thoughtful and active dimensions of this methodological approach to recast theological education in the midst of the present prominence of diversity.²¹

To provide a better description of this methodological paradigm in developing a more relevant epistemological and pedagogical approach for theological education, Preiswerk points to what he considers are some of its principal features:

It is an epistemological framework in which diverse aspects of human thinking and action converge. Even at the risk of being too abstract, we describe this paradigm as inter/trans disciplinary and intercultural, comprehensive and multi-factor...inclusive of a variety of rationalities and human potentialities... contextual and historical...problematizing and transforming, intuitive and unprecedented, procedural and in upward spiral. The intercultural paradigm is a type of rationality that challenges dominant and monocultural rationalities. In this sense it has an inclusive theoretical character that seeks to overcome the ambiguities of the "intercultural" term, facilitating the awareness of a variety of rationalities.²²

(Cuba). He has lived in Germany since 1972. He holds a PhD in Philosophy and Letters from the University of Salamanca and a PhD in Philosophy with a specialization in Linguistics and Theology from the University of Aachen. He is an active member of the European Society of Culture, the Philosophical Society of Leuven, the Intercultural Philosophical Society, the Association of Philosophy and Liberation (AFYL, Mexico), The Society of Philosophical Hispanicism (Madrid), the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Deutsche Lateinamerikaforschung (ADLAF, Germany) and the Society of Intercultural Philosophy (Gesellschaft für Lateinamer Interkulturelle Philosophie). He is a professor at the University of Bremen and Aachen, and a visiting professor at the Pontifical University of Mexico and the Universidad Unisinos in Sao Leopoldo (Brasil). He is Director of the Latin American Section at the Institute of Missionology: Missio (Aachen). He has also given a series of lectures and participated in various International Congresses of universities in Latin America, North America and Europe. His philosophical work is oriented from two main directions: first, that of enhancing the Philosophy of Liberation as a model of intercultural Philosophy—model that gains greater strength since 1989—of which he is considered one of its pioneers. Second, the effort to focus the ethical-political reflection of this Philosophy of Intercultural Liberation in the current context, which is characterized by the pressing problem of the North-South conflict. And the dual objective, that such a philosophy can be erected as an alternative proposition to globalization. As well as inserting into space and among the public with a view to influencing the formation of a world and reality, through its critical function of transformation. There is an interest in showing a perspective on philosophy, which knows and can philosophize at the level of the complex and diverse demands of all cultures and to keep in place the questioning about the legitimate right to globalize cultural diversity. Raúl Fonet-Betancourt (ensayistas.org)

21. Raúl Fonet-Betancourt, "Prólogo," in *Ibid*, p. 19.

22. *Ibid*, 256-257. It is worth mentioning that the prestigious

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It is notable that Latin American²³ and Latinx scholars in North America such as Orlando Espín,²⁴ María Pilar Aquino²⁵ and Nancy E. Bedford²⁶ have already appropriated this paradigm in their theological reflection, for it addresses more adequately the nature of hybridity that characterizes our Latinx identity, and in my estimation the increasing character of the North American identity itself. I've also notice that theological scholars from Europe such as the prestigious professor from the Free University in Holland (Netherlands) Dr. Hans De Wit, used this methodological approach in presenting the Carnahan lectures at the University Institute ISEDET in 2006.²⁷ In fact, I incorporated this paradigm in a presentation I made at Wittenberg, Germany, in October 2012, for a convocation sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation on the topic of, *Lutheran Education and Social Transformation*.

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Concluding remarks

We began this presentation by making reference to the biblical

professor from the Free University in Holland (Netherlands) Dr. Hans De Wit used this methodological approach in presenting the Carnahan lectures at the University Institute ISEDET in 2009.

23. See for example the works produced by Raúl Fonet-Betancourt.

24. "Die Theologie der Latinos/Latinas in den USA als Experiment in der interkulturellen Theologie," in: T. Schreijäck and W. Gantke, eds., *Religionen im Kulturwandel zwischen Selbstannahme und Selbstaufgabe* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2011), 33-48. (After a brief explanation of the meaning of "Latino/a" in "Latino/a theology," the chapter analyzes this theology as an intercultural theology, and it contextualizes its method therein.)

25. María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado Núñez, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

26. Nancy E. Bedford, "Latin American and Latina Feminist Theologies on the Cusp of Interculturality," in María Pilar Aquino and María José Rosado Núñez, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology*, 49-69.

27. See Hans de Wit, *Por un solo gesto de amor: Lectura de la Biblia desde una práctica intercultural* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Universitario ISEDET, 2010).

parable of the Sower. Since I assumed that we can all recall its content, I decided not to dwell on it. However, I do want to observe, that after sharing this parable with his disciples, Jesus said to them,

⁹“Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!”

Let’s never forget the background of this story. While today’s world is full of great challenges, at the time of Jesus, his followers had to confront, not only the rejection and mockery of Jewish religious leaders, they also had to face persecution by the Roman authorities.²⁸

Barbara E. Reid, the recent president of Chicago Theological Union, another of our Association of Chicago Theological Schools here in Hyde Park, argues in one of her recent publications that in many interpretations of the parable, the **Sower** represents **God**, or **Jesus**, and **the seed, God’s Word**. From this perspective, the story shares with us the way God acts in the world. God is like an overgenerous Sower who throws seeds in all types of soil (perhaps the origin of Gonzalez’ irrigation hose?). The narrative, following the early passage in Matt 5:45, becomes an illustration of God’s great love which makes the sun shine over the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. The purpose of the story then is to claim that God conveys seeds in all types of terrain. God offers God’s Word to all people even those who will not accept it or provide fruit. In a similar way, Jesus proclaims God’s Word to all people, offering God’s love to everyone indiscriminately.²⁹

The exhortation to listen, is surely a reference to the *Shema*, that is, the prayer in Deut 6:4-5 (mentioned also in Matt 22:37), a prayer that represents the special relation between Israel and God, except for the fact that in Jesus’ parable, the audience to which God extends God’s blessings are others as well as the Israelites.

For the Matthean community, the parable is a call to include among the faithful, not only Jews marginalized in their society, but also those who are not Jews. For our contemporary Christian communities, the call seems to be the same: we need to struggle for the inclusion of others into our midst as faithful witnesses, whether they are of a different gender, racial, social, ethnic, cultural, or sexual orientation.

Today, I want to join Jesus in his charge to his disciples and exhort you, our graduates at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, for everyone with ears to hear, to listen. For as the parable in Scripture mentions,

¹⁷Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.³⁰

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Those of you graduating today from your program of studies constitute in many ways a special group of Christian leaders. A seminary degree entitles a person to “all the rights and privileges” of a graduate and alumnus. Will the privileges of the Christian, the “blessedness” here pledged, be claimed, and used? How will the practice in your new working environments represent that which you have seen and what you have heard during your programs of studies?

I pray and hope, that the privilege that you have experienced during your formation for the ministry will provide some of the wisdom, skills, and resources demanded by your Christian witness. And remember that, when your experience in ministry gets rough, and your efforts seem worthless, your call to witness in words and deeds will be complemented by the power of God, the Sower, who is guiding and empowering our witness, over all terrains.

Thank you.

28. David Cortés-Fuentes, *Mateo*, in the series: *Conozca su Biblia*. Justo L. González General Editor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 92.

29. Barbara E. Reid, *Las parábolas: predicándolas y viviéndolas* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 85-87.

30. Matt 13:17, from *The People’s Bible*, 1427.