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Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

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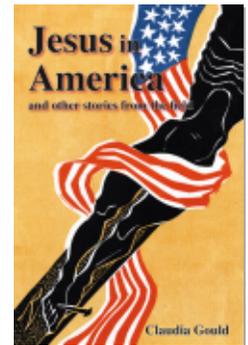
Published by Utah State University Press

Gould, Claudia.

Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field.

Utah State University Press, 2009.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/9401.



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Personal Storage

*I will say to my soul,
Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years;
take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.*

—Luke 12:19

It was Sunday morning. Warm autumn weather sat on the low hills of North Carolina; sunshine poured through clear windows and lay thick as butter on the wooden floor and the wooden table and caressed the shoulders of every single member of the Sunday school class and Bible study group at Calvary Hope Baptist Church. And mine too.

The wave of prayers and petitions came round the table, sweeping toward me. It was moving, and surprising, how much people were able to say, how much sorrow they dared expose. The young man across from me lifted a scared face when it was his turn. “My sister’s new baby’s got two holes in her heart,” he said. “They’re going to operate Tuesday in Raleigh. The hospital in Raleigh.” I tried to imagine a newborn heart. It would be a gilet, I thought. How could you operate on something the size of your thumb? “Heal her, Lord, if it be your will,” somebody said, and the others said amen. I said amen. Frank Thomas, our brother in Christ, had been diagnosed with cancer and we asked God to give him and Sally, his wife, the strength to bear this trial. One seat closer and a woman led us in giving thanks for the safety of her Latino husband, sitting beside her now. What perils had he endured to make his safety something to pray about? Everyone in the room knew but me. Then it was her husband’s turn. He speaks English, I was told, but he prays in Spanish. “He’s praying for his family he had to leave back home in Honduras,” his wife told us. I was caught by that ‘had to’ and also by his being Honduran. Most of the new Latino citizens of the town were Guatemalan, I thought. She went on: “...and thankin’ God for his good new Christian friends, and for bringin’ him to the Lord Jesus.” Everyone said amen as he lifted

his head and smiled around the circle. What was he before he was a Christian, I wondered. I'm supposed to be an anthropologist; surely I should know what they worship in Honduras. Later I asked and was told that he used to be a Catholic. We asked God's blessing on Edith, whose husband had come home for two nights and then gone off again. "It's so hard for her, Lord," Edith's sister said, "bringin' up that child by herself, and she can't depend on anybody in this world but You." We said amen, though everyone knew that her mother was a rock from which no storm could sweep her. "I just pray you make her faith strong enough to hold up under so many blows," her sister went on. No one was impatient as her prayer became narrative, explanatory. Someone passed her a handful of Kleenex. Amen. Amen. We prayed for the continuing recovery of Miss Villard, who was doing so well after her slight stroke. We thanked God that I was among them. We thanked God for the kind welcome I, a stranger, had received from them. Someone invited our prayers for the preacher, who was not really well enough to work, but who kept working. "It sounds to me like walkin' pneumonia," someone said. There was general concern for him. "He just keeps givin' of himself." Then the circle was closed and we came back to Ben, the leader of the class.

Now that the opening prayers were done, it was time for our lesson. Ben was using a book of lessons, one appointed for each Sunday in the year. That day we were to consider giving. "A new initiative," he explained, "in our cooperative program."

I knew something about cooperative giving because I had interviewed the director of the regional Baptist association and he had told me how it worked. He made sure I understood: voluntary contributions, not dues. "It's the way to do great things with little gifts."

The new initiative in giving encouraged us to give a bit more, if we could.

The lesson included a little didactic play, which we were to read out. There were only two parts and I was given one. I was Marie.

The play is set in an unspecified foreign country that has an unfair criminal justice system. It does not take place in the United States. My friend—that is, Marie's friend—has been arrested and locked up, and he has to stay there until he has paid a certain amount of money. There is no one but Marie to pay his fine and buy his freedom. I am willing to help. I send money every single day, but it isn't doing any good. The debt does not diminish. The dialogue begins. I am talking to another friend; Michael, he's called. The young

man whose sister had the sick newborn plays Michael. He explains to me (to Marie) that interest is being added to the fine every day; the amount I am paying will never overtake the debt. Marie needs to have things explained to her, I thought. He says that I'll have to give more. I cannot afford it, my lines say. I have to live too, after all. I'm doing the best I can. I read with expression and so does the young man. We throw ourselves into our parts. "But Marie..." he protests. Then Michael has an idea. "Wait! You send the money in every day in the mail. If you carried it in by hand instead, you could save the cost of the stamp and add that to the money for the fine. You could double what you pay and you could get him out!" But no, I will not do that. I don't have the time. I can't make that long journey so often. I have other things to do.

I (not Marie, but me) thought, Why doesn't she put all the money aside and post it just once a week, then. That would cut the postage to a seventh, or a sixth, anyway. And what's wrong with Michael's helping? And how big a fine can it be if the price of a postage stamp is a significant contribution? But I was taking it too literally. It was only a little instructive tale. It wasn't about the best way to pay off debts or to explore gender politics or anybody's psychology, much less the politics of foreign dictatorships.

Marie's friend languishes in prison because she will not do enough. Are we, Ben asked us, doing enough for Christ where we find him in our fellow human beings? Do we see him naked and clothe him, sick and visit him, in prison and bring him comfort? That was the meaning of the play. That was the meaning of Marie's obtuseness, her stubbornness. It was all our stubbornness. Like Marie, we weren't doing enough.

We moved then to the Bible. Our text was the story of the Rich Young Ruler. It appears in three of the gospels. My friend Gloria, who brought me here, read out Luke's version:

And a certain ruler asked him, saying Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, that is God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother. And he said, All these have I kept from my youth up. Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich.

There was a general chuckle at the plight of the rich young ruler. Somebody said, "I just bet he was sorrowful!" It was more or less what they expected of rich people, I guessed. Ben expounded the point of the text. "Now, that's not a commandment for everybody," he began, "but we should all be *prepared* to give up everything and follow Christ if that commandment ever comes to us." He went on. "Now, I know some of you feel like you're giving all you can, and maybe you won't be able to do any more for this new initiative, and I appreciate that. But it isn't just giving we're talking about here, but it's *sacrificial* giving."

He paused, giving us a moment to take in what he had said. "Let me tell you a story about this lady that came in to the Farm Home Administration—you know, I work down there." He glanced at me, the only one present who might not know.

There was a kind of stir around the table, a renewal of attention. Everyone settled to hear the story.

"She told us," Ben said, "she was gonna lose her home. It was ready to be repossessed. I said that well, we might could help her. If she could pay just a part of her debt. If she can't make the regular interest we can come in with cheap credit. That's what we're there for." He looked around the circle, his face intent.

I imagined him in his office, just so intent. I imagined him looking up, rising, welcoming the woman, regarding her with that same earnest look.

I can see Ben. He would smile at the woman, invite her in.

"Please sit down," he says. But she stands just inside the door, frowning and uncertain. She looks as though she could as easily back herself out as come any farther in. He indicates the chair across the desk from his, but she stands still. She looked at him briefly when she came in, but now her glance slides over him and makes its way around the room, jumping urgently from one point to another as though it might encounter something hidden and malign anywhere in Ben's plain, pleasant little office.

He walks around the desk and over to her. It takes only a few steps to reach her. "Please do sit down," he says again. He touches the sleeve of her sweater, just at the elbow where her arm is bent to hold her carryall and her purse close to her body, and guides her to the chair. His fingers just barely rest on the heather-sage wool. He and the woman finally reach her chair and with his other hand he pulls it out a little further. Warily, she sits.

She perches tensely, as though she might spring up in an instant. For a moment, his hands are poised as though he has just balanced

her on a narrow shelf and is waiting to see whether she will settle or fall, but then he leaves her and goes back to his own side of the desk. Carefully, matching her care, he sits down, picks up a pencil and addresses her:

“How can we help?” he asks.

Now she looks at him and he sees that she is not as old as he thought. Perhaps forty-something; maybe nearer fifty than forty. It was her look of weary anxiety that made her look so old. It is a look he recognizes. He has not seen this woman before, but he has seen that look before.

He knows better than to ask again yet. He sits and waits. He smiles a little, not so much that he looks as though he’s laughing at her or is too cheerful when she is so sad, but enough so that he won’t come across as stern. People get afraid in offices. It’s delicate. Some things you can only learn from experience.

Finally she speaks, “I think I’m in trouble.”

“Well now, why don’t you tell me about it?” he says.

“Thank you. I will. I will tell you.” Yet still she pauses.

He waits, deferential. It is hard, he knows, to come in and talk to somebody, especially somebody younger than you, about something personal. Some people think a thing has to be medical or sexual to be personal. He knows better. Nothing is more personal than money.

“I’m afraid I’m goin’ to lose my home!” Her voice rises in pitch. It wavers.

“Well now, we’ll just see if we can’t keep that from happening,” he says.

There are tears there, but they do not fall. The concentration with which she keeps them back is terrible to see. “It’s my mortgage,” she begins when she can speak. “My husband used to pay some toward it ever’ month, but this last year I’ve had it all to do, and it’s just got a little behind and a little behind and now I’m so far behind, I just don’t think there’s any way I can catch up. Or I could if I had more time, but now they come to tell me that I’ve only got two months to pay off the whole thing—the whole arrears—and you know there’s just no way in the world I could do that. I don’t make enough in two months to pay all that even if I give up eatin’. All the growin’ land’s gone already and if they take my home...if they take my home away from me, I just don’t know what I will do. I’ll just be livin’ like a dog.”

He doesn’t interrupt her, but when she has finished this, her grief’s first outpouring, he says gently, “Now you say your

husband...?” This is another part that’s delicate. You can’t come out and ask if he’s dead, and you can’t ask if he’s gone and run off. But you need to know whether there might be another income to be considered. If you leave the phrase hanging just unfinished, the client will usually say, “...died last spring,” or “...high tailed it out of here as soon as it looked like he might have to do some work.” Or something.

This lady says, “What about him?” The threat of tears is gone.

“Can he help?”

“He’s dead,” she says. Her voice falls to a heavy stop.

Ben says, “Well, I’m real sorry to hear that.” He pauses. “Your mortgage must have been insured.”

She looks away from him, not searching anxiously for phantoms now, but fixing her gaze somewhere else. “His name wasn’t on the mortgage,” she says, “so it didn’t make no difference when he died. I had that plot before I ever got married. I was born in that house. My daddy was a renter and I decided I would never die in a rented room.”

Ben half turns to his computer. “Well, let’s start with your whole name,” he says.

I heard Ben’s real voice. It drowned out his daydream voice and I admonished myself for my moonshine. That woman could have had any one of a hundred stories, stories so strange I could not think of them at all. Perhaps she did have a husband all the time, bedridden or hung over, or just out of work, or working hard but making less than the minimum wage. Ben hadn’t said. That was not part of the story he was telling. It wasn’t the point. Maybe there were children somewhere. Perhaps she had never been married. Maybe she had inherited the house entire and had mortgaged it to finance some ill-advised business venture that had failed years ago.

Ben was saying, “I said we could help her. I was real glad to be able to offer her some hope. Only I said, you’re still going to have to pay something toward the arrears and then something every month, and keep those payments up. Only they’ll be a lot smaller than what you’re having to pay now. Well, she said she just couldn’t do it. I kept figuring and figuring and we kept making the payment smaller and smaller, but no matter how little it was she was going to have to pay, she’d say no, she couldn’t do it. She didn’t have much, but she did have some money coming in, and still she didn’t have a dime to pay toward saving that property.

“Then come to find out she was renting three storage facilities and all of them full of stuff. I said to her, You’d be better off having a yard sale—that way at least you’d get something out of all that stuff. You’d even be better giving it away! She could save enough in three months to pay what the Farm Home Administration wanted her to put in against the arrears. She was paying three hundred and fifty dollars a month.”

The amount was climactic. It brought a gasp or a sigh from the listeners. Breath in or breath out. How could she? Someone said, “It breaks your heart to think of it.” I wondered, what could she be keeping that she cannot part with, even at such a price?

Her voice sounded in my mind like a memory, as though I had heard it before and was hearing it now. That high, clear, mountain voice, sharpened by pain, pointed by grievance. She was talking to me, or maybe to herself.

“Course there’s the furniture,” that voice said, plangent, full of echoes. “Those big pieces that belonged to Mother. People don’t appreciate craftsmanship like that any more. There was that woman lived on Catawba Avenue—Bindle, her name was, or Bobbin, somethin’ that makes you think of the mills. All closed now, the cloth mills. Taken over by the big northern companies and then run down to nothin’. That woman—her name was Harben, I remember it now—she sold all her beautiful furniture that she’d got from her mother and daddy to that swindler Poteat, and bought a whole lot of flimsy factory-made stuff from him. Formica and plywood. For near enough the same price. It was just about a straight swap. And she thought she’d done well for herself. They don’t appreciate... Poteat knew what he’d got, even if she didn’t know what she’d parted with. I went round to his store and looked at it. Well, there might have been somethin’ I could ‘a used. It was beautiful wood they used in the old days. Not just oak, but elm, too, and walnut, and there was a table that had a border of birdseye maple, just as pretty as if somebody’d embroidered it with a needle. ‘Oh, this is a antique,’ is what he said. A antique, my foot! He probably told Miz Harben that same table was way too big and heavy. ‘Nobody wants this big ol’ stuff these days. I can’t hardly sell it.’ I’ve heard the way they talk. Furniture men. Then once he got on the other end, it was a antique and he was askin’ five times as much. Ten times. Hell, you could buy a dozen a those Formica tables for what he wanted for that pretty thing. It’s enough to make you cuss.

“I can remember my sweet mother sittin’ in the big rocker. That’s why I went in my own space at the storage facility and cleared everything off it. So I can sit in it and rock. It creaks, but it’s still solid. They keep things nice there; there’s not a whiff of damp nor a spot of mildew on anything. And it’s quiet. Nobody bothers you.

“It was always a popular pattern. They’ve started makin’ rockin’ chairs like that again, with that slick curve to the rockers that makes ‘em look like the runners on a sleigh, and arms that curve down under your hand like the head on a fiddle. But they’re *Reproduction*. *Heritage*. You might just as well get a rocker in pieces in a cardboard box down to Perkins Hardware and sit in it and look at a picture of an old one as waste your money on one of those Colonial Style frauds. Mother’s was the real thing. But everything about her was real. My mother couldn’t tell a lie to save her life. Not ever’body liked it, but that’s how she was. She was a real mother, too. She had to do outside work sometimes but she was our mother every hour she lived. ‘Her children arise up and call her blessed,’ and that’s the truth.

“I’m fixin’ to bring it home before much longer, her rocker. Once I’ve got the place done up like it used to be. Once I’m sure where it’ll sit. And the oak dining room suit, and Daddy’s bookcase. That’s solid walnut, I think. I’ll polish them with real beeswax polish and bring out the light in the wood. You can’t do much better than dust in here.

“I’ve got two real nice dressers, too, and the cedar chest—they all take up a good deal of room. But most of what I got down there to Personal Storage Inc. is papers. All packed in cardboard boxes. Now, they look neat from the outside, but they need sorting out badly. One day, when I’ve got the time, I’ll go through them. Why, they’re more valuable even than the furniture! They’re real history! All the family papers—they go right back to the War Between the States and some of ‘em further back than that even. The old family Bible is in one of them boxes. I can’t say just which one, but I’ll find it right away, once I start opening them. Of course I’ve got my Bible at the house for readin’, but the big leather bound one with all the entries of births and deaths in it, that’s important. A document. It’s too precious to leave layin’ around the house, the state it’s in now. I’ll have a little table for it, just the right size, when I bring it home. My daddy showed me—it was before I could even read—my own name in that book, Martha Mary Stanton Woodbury, right where he wrote it hisself, the day I was born.

“And letters. There’s letters goin’ right back to the war, when my daddy was overseas. Before I was born. Letters from both my grandmothers. You could put those in a book. They make books nowadays out of old letters. They’re history. And I think there might be a diary in there, that my mother kept when she was a girl. Lord! That would be the Great Depression time. The time between the wars. Now, anybody would be interested in that. Papers like that are valuable. And there are pictures, boxes and boxes of photos, some of them in real nice old frames. And whole newspapers with important stories: D-Day and the Kennedy assassination and that flood in ’77 or ’78 when the bridge was washed away. Besides all the ones with the family in them: weddings and retirements and church news, and Mother cut out the clipping whenever I won a prize for anything. I would’ve done that myself if the Lord had blessed me with children that had a’ lived. But their birth announcements are in there: To Robert and Martha Gimpsey a Son, To Robert and Martha Gimpsey a Daughter. And their death announcements are there. A birth and then a death, a birth and then a death. Deeply mourned by sorrowing parents. They never got old enough to be baptized. But that don’t matter. The Lord loved them, and they’re with Him now. They were budded on earth to bloom in heaven. Beautiful flowers in the Master’s bouquet. And I have all the cards; my birthday cards from when I was a little girl, and then—I shouldn’t wonder if they was in the same box—all the congratulations cards for the babies. The tags off all the wedding presents. Sympathy cards for the babies, and the ones for Daddy, and for Mother. The ones I got when Bob died are still there on the mantelpiece. I hadn’t but just started renting the facility when he was taken. I’ll have to get round to puttin’ them in a box and fetchin’ them down to the storage. I’ll do that real soon.”

Martha’s voice, so strong and resonant, faded. It could be something different altogether, I told myself, that she had in storage. But whatever it was, it was precious to her. I had a sort of sense, as Ben’s voice supplanted Martha’s in my head, how it would be to have him tell me to put my treasures into a yard sale, to spread them out on trestle tables for strangers to pick through. I wondered if I would be any more sensible, any more tough-minded, than Ben’s much-pitied client.

“But you know,” Ben was saying. The story was ending now. “She just couldn’t do it. And I told her, you’ll lose all that stuff anyway. It’ll be taken away from you. Your creditors will take it if your house

gets repossessed. But that woman could not bear to part with her possessions. She was just not free of those things.”

He was silent for a moment, looking around at us; that was the way he did it, I realized. The way he invited us to ponder his message. He gave us the story, then gave us the time to encompass it in silence. Then he told us. He said, “Are we free of our possessions? Just like that woman, are we putting everything at risk just because we can’t bear to give up warehouses full of things we don’t even have a use for? Maybe our eternal souls are in danger of being repossessed, even though Christ is standing ready to pay every debt and set us free. We might be like that Rich Young Ruler and just like him we can’t truly follow Christ because it makes us too sorrowful to give up our many possessions. We would be better off if we were to sell all our worldly ambitions or give them away and then invest everything in our salvation instead, and our eternal home.”

We sat quiet, reflecting. Everybody looked thoughtful. Perhaps they were shamed, realizing their worldliness. I thought what a good story that was, a little modern parable: firmly linked to the Bible text, impelling consideration. Really a lot like Jesus’s parables. It was local and the situation was recognizable, it invited sympathy for its protagonist while still allowing us to know better. And the moral was clear. Better than the Bible story perhaps for us who don’t know any rich young rulers but who have had some experience of unprofitably hanging on to things.

And then there was Ben, whom I had misjudged. I didn’t notice until now that I was misjudging him, but I was. Here was Ben, not a religious professional, following his timetable, working his way week by week through mass-produced, mass distributed inspiration, ploddingly selling virtue to people who were mildly in the market for it, making a pitch for piety and good causes. His was a small town life, closed in by mountains, restricted by small expectations and tethered by responsibilities.

But all the time, while he did his full-time job and his part-time duty to the church, while he fathered his family and helped his parents out, he had been carrying with him the texts of his faith, making his life into a text. Here was this window he knew how to open in his small town sky, a window through which great truths were to be seen. He showed us the view, gestured to it: “Look! Here is the kingdom of heaven!” His vision had seemed narrow to me, but that was because I did not see it with his eyes. Really, from time to time, the sky opens wide at his touch, and beyond it is eternity.