

Living In the Now and Not Yet, Here Yet Far-Off Kingdom of God

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:13-30

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A central focus of Jesus' teaching and preaching was something he called the kingdom of God. He proclaimed that it has come near (Mt 4:17). He assured us, it is within us and among all of us together (Lk 17:20-21). Yet he also taught us to pray for the coming of God's kingdom (Mt 6:10). He warned us that no one, not the angels in heaven, not even the Son of Man himself knows when the kingdom will come (Mt 24:36), yet exhorted us to stay awake and watch for its arrival (Mt 24:42; 25:13). Jesus teaches us three paradoxes about the kingdom: (1) it is now and not yet; (2) it is here, yet still far off; (3) we will never know the timing of its arrival yet we are to keep alert for the signs of its coming. What that means for us is that we live simultaneously in two realms of authority: the rulers of this world on the one hand, and the coming reign of God on the other. Both of our readings this morning address this situation.

The first reading from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, addresses a community trying to live faithfully into God's kingdom while embedded in the empire of Caesar. Worshipped as a god, Caesar promises peace and security, hope and salvation, but delivers war and conflict, bread and circuses. Paul's advice for his readers is to "be who they are"¹ — children of light and children of the day. He urges them to be awake and sober, not to fall asleep or become drunk. To live faithfully into God's kingdom in the empire of Caesar requires being watchful and alert, well-balanced and self-controlled. It means not becoming complacent or confused, to resist being carried away by the false promises of Caesar's empire. Whether they manage to stay awake or fall asleep, Paul assures them they are destined for salvation through Jesus Christ who died for them so that they might live with him here and now and for all eternity. So the proper task for this time and place is to encourage one another and build up each other.

Our second reading from Matthew's Gospel is the familiar parable of the talents. It too is about the challenge of staying awake and being faithful as one lives into God's kingdom while embedded in Herod's kingdom and Caesar's empire.

Jesus' 1st century audience would have understood that the man who went on a journey represents King Herod or his sons who traveled to Rome to curry favor imperial support. The "talents" that he entrusted to the slaves were actually gold coins. Each coin was worth 6000 denarii or 20 years worth of wages. The first slave was given five gold coins, the equivalent of 100 years worth of wages. The second slave was given two, for a total of 40 years of wages. The third slave was given just a single gold coin, or 20 years worth of wages, which he buried in the ground.²

While we might find his behavior incomprehensible, Jesus' 1st century audience knew that this slave was just trying to live faithfully in accordance with ancient Judean religious and cultural practices. (1) The law of Moses forbids charging interest. (2) The appropriate practice for

¹ Amy L.B. Peeler, "Commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11" at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2109.

² Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus - A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) pp. 274-275.

handling someone else's money was to put it in a safe place, preferably burying it in the ground or inside a brick wall. It was never to be used in one's own business or lent to another.³ Afraid of his harsh master this slave wanted to make sure his actions were entirely legal and ethical.

The first two slaves violated both the law and the best, ethical practices of the day. Each of them was like their master, who admits to being a harsh man who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he does not scatter seed. That's a poetic way of saying he was a thief and a robber. The third slave buried the gold coin and returned it intact to his master, basically saying "Thanks, but no thanks. I'm not, and cannot be a thief and a robber." The master reacted exactly as Jesus' 1st century audiences expected him to. In Herod's kingdom and Caesar's empire the rich always got richer, while those with little or nothing lost even that.

For Jesus' earliest followers the parable warned them that trying to live faithfully into God's kingdom while embedded in Herod's kingdom was a fearsome, anxiety producing endeavor, highly likely to result in punishment, persecution, torture and death no matter what choices they made. The good news was that God did not behave like this.

Over time the interpretation of the parable changed. The man who went on a journey became a stand-in for Christ, who left, but will come again to judge the world. The slaves came to represent Christians, to whom God has given "talents" — abilities, gifts and responsibilities which they are to use or else... they will be cast into the outer darkness. Not good news, but may be somewhat effective as a tool to guilt and shame believers into doing more and working harder. Let me be honest.... I don't like this interpretation because it misrepresents God, and Christ's mission in the world.

The Coffee on Thursdays group is currently reading Jim Wallis' *The (Un)Common Good*. Wallis reminds us that Christ's mission as he proclaimed it was to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, give sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free (Luke 4:16-19). Wallis describes the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount as "the charter for the kingdom of God, the Magna Carta or constitution of the kingdom; they are the *instruction manual* for living in the new age" (p. 47), for living into God's now and not yet, here yet far off kingdom while embedded in this society.

What happens when we read the parable of the talents through the lens of Christ's mission of bringing good news to the poor, releasing the captives, giving sight to the blind? What happens when we evaluate each character against the criteria of the beatitudes and the sermon on the mount?

It becomes evident that the man who went on a journey and entrusted his wealth to his slaves can't be Jesus. The master in the parable admits that he is a harsh man, a thief and a robber whose mission is acquiring money. All his time, energy and resources are devoted to that goal. He is not meek, merciful, or peacemaking. He persecutes and reviles those who don't do what he wants. He is spiritually impoverished, blinded by wealth and power, captive to the god mammon. The two slaves who double their master's money, are exactly the same. These three characters are not just embedded in Herod's kingdom, they are in bondage to its goals and values. (As an aside, just imagine how many hungry people might have been fed with 160 years worth of wages).

³ www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/2374-bailments

The third slave is afraid of his master and tries to maintain his spiritual values and his integrity by obeying the law of Moses and religious custom. He tries to live into the values of God's kingdom and he is persecuted and reviled for doing so. Everything he has is taken away from him, he ends up poor and in prison. Could he have avoided that fate if he had compromised even a little with his master's values? Maybe. Maybe not.

Christ's mission is directed at each and every one of those characters albeit in different ways. Each of us is in a similar situation as these characters. In baptism we are called to take up Christ's mission in the world to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, give sight to the blind and free the oppressed. We are called to live out the values of the beatitudes and the sermon on the mount here and now while we are still embedded in societies, companies and institutions that operate with different goals and values. Even the organization that I work for is deeply embedded and enmeshed in the values of our society even as it seeks to carry out Christ's mission in the world. Our challenge as persons claimed by Christ in the waters of baptism is to live every day as children of the light, awake and sober, well-balanced and self-controlled. In advancing Christ's mission we do not have to be afraid like the third slave to take some risks, to make some compromises. We can act with confidence knowing that awake or asleep, sober or drunk, we are not destined for wrath but for salvation through Jesus Christ. Amen.