

November 19, 2017 Pentecost 24  
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30;  
Choices?

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Gracia y paz del Dio; Padre, Hijo e Espíritu Santo  
Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Can we just say something out loud?

The texts we have heard recently have been disturbing, difficult and decisive. And, trust me, next week is no picnic, either! We have wrestled with the parable of the wicked tenants, the man kicked out of a wedding banquet for wearing the wrong clothes; five foolish bridesmaids left out in the cold without oil in their lamps and now this slave tossed out for burying the master's money. No joke!

This past week I gathered with 5 ELCA Bishops and about 50 other First Call pastors and we were all stumped by this text, even the bishops. How are we to puzzle through Jesus tossing people out of the kingdom of God? The first puzzle is the word "it" . . . "Again, "it" will be like a man going on a journey" What is "it"? If we assume "it" is the kingdom of heaven, based on the preceding parable of the wise and foolish virgins, we hear another parable of harsh judgment made by "the master".

Which brings us to the second puzzle. Who is "the man going on a journey"?

If we assume the man is an allegorical representation of Jesus, like the bridegroom or the host of the wedding feast, we are confronted by a Savior who kicks some people out of the kingdom. If we believe that Jesus Christ is the Savior of all people and if we believe that Jesus will draw all people to himself, then how can Jesus summarily dismiss some just because they ran out of oil or wore the wrong clothes or did not invest the gold they received? If we assume Jesus is the master in this parable, we are disturbed when Jesus takes the small amount from one who has less and gives it to the one who has the most. If we assume Jesus is the master, we are astonished to hear his decisive punishment: "throw the servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth".

The gathered pastors and bishops were stumped. Until we heard Bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke, our Oregon Synod bishop reflect on this text in his sermon Wednesday morning. The focus of the week's lectures and conversations was dialectics, or dualism. The easiest way to define dialectic or dualism is this: Everything can be distilled into either/or categories: Up or down; in or out; right or left; dark or light . . . you get the idea.

Well, here are these three servants. Each is given a specific amount of money to manage while the master is on a journey. They each make a choice, invest the money or bury it. This is where Bishop Dave's reflection had a profound impact on my understanding of this parable.

First, might this is a parable about choices. The master chose to give the slaves differing amounts to manage "based on their ability". That seems arbitrary and commerce-based. I thought the kingdom of God was based on God's economy of grace and love, not monetary. The slaves made choices. We are told that two of them chose to "put [the] money to work and gained [double]" what they had been given. The third slave also made a choice. He went out of his way to hide the master's money. Why?

Listen to the explanations the slaves give and the master's response to each: Slave One and Slave Two proudly proclaim that they have "gained" more money. We don't know how they doubled their money, but the master seems to be extremely pleased with the results. "Come", he says "share in your master's happiness". They are each put in charge of more stuff.

Slave Three boldly accuses the master of shady business tactics calling him a hard man who harvests other people's crops. The slave admits fear. Fear of what? Fear of whom? The master's response is chilling. He does not deny the slaves allegation of dubious business practices, but, the harsh judgment seems way out of proportion to the business error the slave made. I mean, come on, who hasn't made a bad investment decision?

But here is the point of Bishop Dave's reflection: The master appears to be annoyed that the slave could think of only two choices, "gain more money" like his fellow slaves, or "bury the money" and gain nothing. The master suggests that there was another option: put the money in the bank and at least earn some interest.

What decisions are you facing? Are you stuck on a dialectic choice: either this or that? Is there another option?

We are coming to the end of the liturgical church year. Next week is the last Sunday of the year. We are coming to the end of the calendar year . . . December 31<sup>st</sup> is only six weeks from today. As we close out this year of dwelling in the gospel according to Matthew we have several choices to make in our faith journey.

You have heard the advice "Jesus is coming, look busy"? It sounds kind of smart aleck, but when you think about it, it's true . . . well, maybe instead of "look" busy we should change it to "be" busy.

We know that Christ will come again. How will we spend our time while we wait? According to the prophet Zephaniah, we are to be silent. To listen for God's will in our lives. The Psalmist's prayer is that God will teach us to number our days so that we may have wise hearts. That seems like a good prayer.

Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonica offers real and practical hope as we await the second coming of Jesus. Because we are children of the light, the day that we still wait for will not surprise us. And while we wait in the light, we are to encourage one another, build each up the body of Christ, and tell the good news to those who have not yet heard it.

This is where the third slave made his mistake. He made assumptions about the master's intent. So, instead of using what he had been given to encourage others, to build-up the body of Christ and proclaim the good news, he buried his gift out of fear. The newly installed bishop of Eastern Washington-Idaho Synod, Reverend Kristen Kuempel reminded us new pastors that YOU all have called us to proclaim the good news in your midst. So, here is the good news for today, proclaimed without fear:

Jesus Christ was present at creation.

Jesus Christ is present today in the bread and wine.

Jesus Christ will come again, drawing all of creation into eternal light and glory.

Are we ready?

Thanks be to God!