

Proper 28 Year A

“For to all who have more will be given and they will have an abundance; but for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

That doesn't sound like good news!

Sounds kind of like the Alabama tax code doesn't it? And more frighteningly the direction towards which our federal tax code could be headed...just a little food for thought...a homiletic lagniappe...This could be an occupy Wall Street sermon, but I'll leave that for the news pundits.

I don't know if you've noticed or not, but there is a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth in this Gospel, much more so than in the other two synoptic gospels, Mark and Luke....no such language in John....I had a seminary professor who said laughingly that without Matthew we might not have ever come up with the concept of hell...Matthew is very much drawing from the apocalyptic literature popular in his day...the literature of the end times...the time of final judgment and revelation...when all manner of thing will be set right, because in his world things are so very wrong, The Jerusalem Temple destroyed, tyrannical occupation by Rome...police raids without warning, brutal taxation....so in his rhetoric towards his hearers, that is in his means of persuasion...he uses again and again the hellish images of being cut off from God's kingdom, the coming of which he describes as imminent...coming at any moment, coming as we speak....That is what rhetoric is meant to do...to move people to action....to turn people around...to give them a wake up call....make them think, and act.

Parables are a high art form of rhetoric in the ancient world....because generally speaking they take ordinary images of daily life to represent something profound, like poetry...the imagination can't resist such a ploy....so Jesus, seeking to engage the imagination, the animating spirit within us, speaks quite often in parables...sometimes allegorical, sometimes in riddle, often contradictory, always controversial and most often too close to home.

The parable we read for today is a prime example....the parable of the talents, very much like the parable we read a few Sundays ago about the wedding feast. The point I made about that parable was that so many interpreters equated the King with God, the son with Jesus, the slaves doing the inviting as the disciples and the guests as the rest of us...You remember the story...the king invites his elite friends, but the slaves of the elite friends rough up his slaves doing the inviting...and the king in anger sends his henchmen to kill his so-called friends' slaves...then he invites all the street people....and there is one among them improperly dressed...and the king

binds him and throws him out into the street....where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.....so if the king is God ...who would worship such a God.... this parable is a parable about what the kingdom is not...and what the way of the world is.....and yet commentator after commentator try to make this an allegory for God's kingdom....maybe for Calvin, who believed in a narrow exclusivity of the Faith, but not for me.

Today's parable is no different...commentary after commentary equate the man gone on a journey as Jesus after his ascension (Matthew never mentions an ascension) soon to return...meanwhile he entrusts his slaves/disciples to bear fruit...the slaves custodial responsibility over the talents the allegory....and upon the man's return (Jesus' return) he rewards the slaves that have made him money...and punishes the one who merely returned what he had given him....the slave admits his fear of the master and calls him out as being a crook...whereupon the slave is thrown guess where? into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.....each commentator's interpretation is almost identical....while Jesus is away, it is up to us to increase the kingdom, bear fruit, and our reward will be great when we come into God's kingdom....that is after all a theme in Matthew...If we are lazy and don't produce we get eternal punishment...Calvin smiling in the grave.

But this interpretation doesn't work, as don't the interpretations of the wedding feast....In this reading talents are the operative metaphor...but a talent is the equivalent of millions of dollars, wealth that only an empire could possess....also in this principally agricultural world, a great portion of the population were slaves who would manage land and wealth for absentee landlords and nobles, the vassals of Rome....so the hearer upon hearing of a man on a journey leaving his estate in charge of his underlings...that's every day life to them...the way the world works, the wealthy gaining wealth on the backs of the poor.... In this story the climax occurs when the slave merely gives back to the owner what was originally given him, because he said he was afraid to risk the markets because he knew his boss as harsh and deceitful...God is not harsh and deceitful.....this is a picture of the world of dog eat dog...of top down patronage Matthew is describing....and if we need any proof, the man says it all in a nutshell about the world these people live in: "For those who have more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken from them." That's not the world God intends....In fact it is contrary to all of Jesus' teachings in the sermon on the mount a few chapters earlier: blessed are the poor, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the just, blessed

are the peacemakers...If someone sues you, give them your cloak....give away all that you have and follow in the way, feed people, love your enemy.

Now I have been quite the biblical nerd this week. So if you'll indulge me a bit... I checked my gospel parallels book and found that this parable appears also in Luke but not in Mark...Now this got me all psyched up...Y'all know that Mark is the oldest gospel written and that Matthew and Luke are reading Mark some ten or twenty years later copying and editing their own gospels....but Matthew and Luke have another source unknown to Mark dubbed by scholars as Q. This parable we read today does not appear in Mark but does appear in Luke...so it is decidedly Q material....the same source known to Matthew, but unknown to Mark... notice how Luke tells his version:

So he said, 'A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, "Do business with these until I come back." But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, "We do not want this man to rule over us." When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, "Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds." He said to him, "Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities." Then the second came, saying, "Lord, your pound has made five pounds." He said to him, "And you, rule over five cities." Then the other came, saying, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow." He said to him, "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest." He said to the bystanders, "Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds." (And they said to him, "Lord, he has ten pounds!") "I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence."

Now you've never heard that version read in church...because it is not in the lectionary cycle....and it is clear this is critique of empire and its corrupted system of power...We just get the Matthean version which is greatly softened, so much so that many scholars try to make a kingdom allegory out of it...perhaps Matthew softened his version for fear of the authorities which may have been more aggressive in his day compared to Luke....but the holes are just too big and contrary to the core teachings of Jesus for it to be an allegory of God's gracious kingdom...so what do we make of all this. Why I am I so jazzed about it. Maybe because I'm Right?

First, I think it is clear that Matthew is contrasting the way of empire up and against the way of the kingdom. In the verses that follow immediately after this parable we hear the core of Jesus' teaching yet again.... to serve me you must feed the hungry, to serve God's kingdom you must give drink to the thirsty....in God's kingdom we take care of our sick and our poor...attend to the captives....In God's kingdom, Jesus tells us time and again throughout this gospel that we never make decisions out of fear....In God's kingdom we don't just forgive seven times but seventy times seven... we are to be peacemakers and non-violent in God's world, God's commonweal of equals.

And the point I want to make today is this: Like the slave who calls out his greedy master...we are as people of faith to call out the ills of our world...we are reminded in these parables that we must pay attention to our world and the wrongs in it, and offer our lives to set them right....Matthew's gospel contrasts the way of Jesus up and against the way of our hierarchical world... and such a contrast makes this gospel intensely counter-cultural... This life of faith into which we have been baptized calls us to be non-violent imaginative critics and non-violent imaginative world changers....The Christian vision is not warm and fuzzy...It is not a package of beliefs tied up with a ribbon...Christianity is a tale of comedy and tragedy woven together still unfolding as the universe unfolds....an incomplete epic in which we play vital roles daring to believe and acting as if the light will overcome the dark....We are sent into that outer dark, in which there is weeping and gnashing of teeth to save those there imprisoned; save them from a world that casts out its weak and its powerless, a world that casts out its old and it's addicted and its sick and its poor...some say there is no hell....but just look to the periphery and you will see...but hell is now, just as God's coming kingdom is now....and it is for us good people of faith to bring heaven in earth, to bring light to the dark... to bring the broken back into a world not in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, which sadly is becoming the status quo, into a world marked by fear and violence...but back into a world where God's abundance is graciously shared, a world that is just and at peace...Our work, the very work of creation is not complete until the weeping and gnashing of teeth are no more.....and the outer dark is filled with light.