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Lutheran Church of the Epiphany~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía, Hempstead, New York
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*Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28A – November 15, 2020
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, Psalm 90: 1-8, 12, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30*

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

For many years I have heard the Parable of the Talents which we heard again today preached as teaching that we are to use the gifts – whether wealth or abilities – to carry out God’s mission in the world. And if our use of the gifts multiplies the value of the gifts for God’s work, we will have eternal reward in heaven. I have even preached this myself.

But I always felt uncomfortable about the situation in the parable being thought to be like the realm of heaven. Even more so, I was distressed to think that the mean and unforgiving master in the parable was to be taken to represent Jesus.

In the parable, the first servant turned his five talents of money into ten, the second turned his two into four, but the third – being afraid of the master’s personality – buried his one talent in the ground to keep it safe for the master’s return.

Now, we live and read the parable in a culture that is materialistically driven, governed by greed and the accumulation of stuff. The Bible was written in what scholars refer to as an honor-shame culture, where stuff and money didn’t matter all that much, because it was thought that there was a limited amount of it. People had what they were entitled to, by virtue of their status by birth. In an honor-shame culture, people seek to hold on to the honor they were born to. Money is not an end, but a means to an end.

In an honor-shame culture, someone might be terrifically rich, but if he didn’t have honor, he wasn’t well-liked or respected.

Further, honor-shame cultures typically understand that wealth and possessions are in a fixed supply. That is, if one person gained wealth, it could be only at the expense of someone else. The only way someone could accumulate wealth is if he took it from someone else. The rich get richer only at the expense of the poor, which, in an honor-shame culture, was an extremely shameful way to live. In honor-shame cultures, as the rich accumulated wealth, they saw it as their duty and responsibility to give this wealth back to society in the form of music, arts, schools,

hospitals, and other such humanitarian works. They became Patrons. This way, the wealthy gained greater honor, but not necessarily greater wealth.

So let's look at the parable again with this in mind. In our culture, the heroes are the servants who accumulate more stuff. But in an honor-based culture, the people who accumulate stuff are the villains. To Jesus' listeners, the hero of the story is the third servant, who did not become richer, but instead was content to return to his master what he was given originally.

The third servant was so content that he didn't even put the one talent in the bank – or the first century version of a bank – to collect interest. But an investment like this would have resulted in someone else having been charged a usurious rate. There was either a loan without interest, or a loan bearing a very high rate of interest, which was forbidden to Jews because it was unjust.

The traveling master in the parable has been said to represent Jesus' ascension from earth, leaving his servants, analogous to Jesus' followers, to carry out his mission as their own – until the master's return home – or Jesus' ultimate return to earth at the end of time. We have been taught that when Jesus returns to earth, each of us must give an account to Jesus for how we used the time and money he has blessed us with. But isn't that inconsistent with our always saying that we don't "earn" our way into heaven by good deeds? Do we think that Jesus was suggesting that he will behave shamefully when he returns to earth?

So who does the master represent? Consider that the master represents the idol-gods of this age, the ones who teach models and the morally reprehensible behavior of stealing from the poor to make themselves rich. Jesus is teaching that this is the kind of behavior Christians can expect from the world when we try to live according to his new code of honor ethics.

Are there objections to this view of the parable of the talents? Well, what about one of the things I said at the beginning of the sermon – that this situation represents the realm of heaven? Let's look at the passage again – it begins with "[f]or it is as if a man... ." This parable doesn't say anything about "the kingdom of heaven... ."

The preceding parable and the next one do have that introductory phrase, but our parable doesn't and it is in contrast to the surrounding parables. And the master went into the "far country," which is where the prodigal son went when he left home, and which is a biblical expression that signifies life apart from a relationship with God.

Furthermore, the final statement of the parable has the master demanding that his enemy be cast out of society and killed. Again, does this represent something God will do? No, but it does foreshadow what will happen to Jesus himself and those who follow him when they stand up to the idol-gods of their age.

This approach gives me more comfort with the parable – it makes more sense to me now. Maybe it will to you, too.

So what about another term that we hear at this end of the church year, when we consider Christ's return to the earth – the end time. That term is “the day of the Lord.” Thanks to the proponents of the “Left Behind” series of books and the many other people who have predicted the end of the world – with great assurance and specificity, but without what we would hear as truth – we think of the end of time and, therefore, the day of the Lord as a time of great tumult, natural disasters, pain and grief.

But the phrase “the day of the Lord” in the Old Testament referred to the day on which the Lord would cause God's people to be successful in battle – a day on which they would come to a time of peace.

Now, Zephaniah's words that are our first lesson text for today are difficult to hear, and it may be somewhat difficult to understand. It seems that, because God's chosen people have not been faithful to their covenant – their agreement with God – because they have worshiped idols and not obeyed the rules of life we know as the Torah, God has reached the breaking point – once again. God has prepared a sacrifice and searched Jerusalem – in fact, all of Judah – looking for faithful people. God has found not one faithful person, so Jerusalem will be the sacrifice in battle with Babylon, one of Judah's age-old enemies. They will lose the battle and they will be taken into exile.

Now this consequence for the people's behavior may sound like anything but the result imposed by a forgiving God. But we know that, after 50 years, the exiled people of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem. They built it back up, as we learn in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The exile, however, was the consequence of their broken covenant – if they weren't going to uphold their end of the bargain, God wasn't going to uphold the divine protection that had been promised.

And, from our vantage point, we see even more forgiveness than the Babylonian exiles could have. Today, “the day of the Lord brings not wrath and judgment, but a future in which all things are made new by the God who cares about the good of

all things and all people.” (Eric Mathis, Working Preacher Commentary on Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id.) In fact, “the day of the Lord announced in Zephaniah is frightful news. In Christ, however, it becomes good news for Christ’s church and the world.” (Mark S. Gignilliat, Working Preacher Commentary on Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id.)

And while we wait for that day – the date or time of which no one knows – we are equipped to serve God and God’s other children as Paul cheered on the young church in Thessalonica: “But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day... . . . For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” (1 Thess. 5:4a, 9-11.)

And what more can we ask for as we keep our faith, deepening it and opening ourselves ever more to God as we carry out God’s mission for us through our ministries?

Let’s pray: Righteous God, our merciful master, you own the earth and all its people, and you give us all that we have. Inspire us to serve you with justice and wisdom, and prepare us for the joy of the day of your coming, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen