

Pentecost 24, Proper 28
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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The Day of the Lord

I knew someone once who was a lawyer. He told me, "You know all the bad lawyer jokes? They are about me." You know the ones, like why sharks don't bite lawyers because of professional courtesy... (No offense, Andy. We all know you're not one of them.) I don't know whether it was the shock value he enjoyed, or he was just telling his story, but the stories he told me proved him right. He told about clients who were cattle rustlers in Texas. They would charge into a ranch's pasture at 2 in the morning in 4-wheel drive pick-ups, round up a fat cow, kill it with a .22 pistol that doesn't make much sound, and in a matter of 15 minutes, have it carved up and carted off the property to take to a meat processor who didn't ask questions. All the rancher had in the morning for what was an \$1000 cow was blood and gore on the grass. This lawyer would fight to get them off, usually by so attacking the other person's defense that he needed no recourse to an actual argument. He used the system to make his clients rich, and they rewarded him handsomely. As far as I know, he was never disbarred.

I know this runs against all that we have ever heard about the parable in today's Gospel lesson, but perhaps there is another way to look at it with implications for today. Jesus says the Kingdom of Heaven is like when a man goes on a trip. We are not told what kind of a man he was, or what his business is, but we know several things from the story. We know he is rich—8 talents was a bucketload of money in those days. We know he had slaves that did his work, and we have a social comment on him that he himself agrees with. He is a harsh man who reaps where he did not sow, and gathers where he did not scatter. One who reaps where he did not sow gained access to increases that are not the result of his own actions. One who gathers where he did not scatter somehow appropriated another's work. This is not a nice guy. He is a ruthless, unscrupulous businessman who is only concerned with the bottom line.

You notice that there is nothing in this parable that questions the business practices of his slaves who doubled his money. They could have invested it in the arenas where men killed one another for public entertainment, or brothels or slave markets or pirates or usurious lending. There is no moral critique, just rewards for a fat bottom line. In other words, he could well be a syndicated mobster.

How is this like the Kingdom of Heaven? Look at the reading from Zephaniah. "You pray piously for the coming of the Day of the Lord," says the prophet, "But you don't know for what you ask. The Day of the Lord will be gloom and doom, utter destruction and ruin." To whom is he speaking? To a sinful Israel, to those who have not been faithful to the covenant. To them he says their gold and silver will not avail them of anything in the Day of the Lord.

Here the echo with the parable in today's Gospel lesson. The rich man rewards the first two slaves for playing his game. The last man, out of fear, doesn't play the game. What

is he afraid of? We are not told, but if you look at it through the lens of Zephaniah, he is afraid of the power of unscrupulous people to punish him for sticking to his conscience, which in the end he does. He, of all four of them, keeps his integrity. He, of the four of them, need not fear the Day of the Lord.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that true Christianity exists in the margins of society. It's not that we just march to a different drummer, people of faith (and this includes all faith traditions) access a deeper truth. We hear a more fundamental drum, beating out a different way of being. This new way of being is based, not on the financial bottom line, but on the good of one's neighbor—where “neighbor” includes all of creation. Divine love always reaches past one's ego to the self-hood of another—any other, because it recognizes in the other an extension of the self-hood of God, just like it does in oneself. Divine love is always fiercely communal, and fiercely committed to justice.

This new deeper drumbeat will always ask the hard questions out of love. I remember my father being good at hard questions. “Where were you? What were you doing? What was your intent?” and always in the end, the message loud and clear: “I love you too much to let you do what would do harm to you and others.” The community of faith, based as it is on deeper truths, must love the world as God does, too much not to ask the hard questions.

Where will it take us?

It will take us to the margins of our hearts, where we live our faith. It will always thrust us into the liminal areas where comfort is not nearly so important as truth, and easy sailing as justice. It will take us to our edges, our growing, painful edges, where questions outnumber answers. This new drumbeat will confront us with difficult truths.

It will take us to the margins of humanity, where marginal people live, people who are often brown and black, Asian, Indigenous, LGBTQ+, the disabled and prisoners, those suffering from homelessness, alienation and addiction, those who have left an untenable life in a land far away to find a life worth living here, and are constantly hiding because they have no documents, the veterans, 40% of whom suffer from homelessness, addiction and other prices they have paid for our nation. This deeper drum will take us to broken and hurting people, to bind up their wounds, listen to their stories, and give them a place at the table.

It will take us to the margins of the heart of God, those places where God gathers the pain of the world up in the divine bosom on the Cross, where God is present, though not always recognized, healing and restoring the world, where God holds the good, the bad and the ugly all equally in the divine heart. It will take us to that gap between what we think we know and where we know we've been, the liminal space between the dualistic ego-driven world and the Great Heart, in whom all are members one of another and the world is one. There, we discover that in the heart of God the center is everywhere and there are no margins. This deeper drumbeat will take us to the margins and back where

we find God is already here, healing and restoring the world, and that through some miraculous grace, we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.

The Day of the Lord, in Zephaniah, is a day of darkness and gloom, and in the parable as I have read it today favors the rejected one. Turning the world upside down—or rather, right side up—is a formidable task, and those whose lives have been upside down so long they think it's right side up will feel upended. Maybe we will feel upended. So be it. The Kingdom coming is worth the upheaval. Loving the world into right side up is participating in the healing and restoring of the world.

Meditation Questions

1. Where are you "on the margins?"
2. Where are you in the center of things, and the idea of going to the margins is frightening?
3. What must it be like for those who are always forced to the margins?
4. How is God present in the margins of life?