

“The Sin of Omission”

Probably for most of us this is a familiar parable.

And traditionally, since it comes up in our lectionary in the fall, it is used to talk about stewardship –

likely because it mentions “talents”, which for us means those innate gifts with which we are born,

and because a “talent” was a denomination of currency, so it’s easy to associate the parable with money.

So the easy surface-level interpretation is to say that Jesus is telling us to use our time, talent, and treasure, specifically, in our work in the church.

There are even some corners of the church where this parable is taken out of context

and used to support capitalism and even the abuse of capitalism,

with the message that “it takes money to make money”.

But as anyone who has studied scripture and knows anything about Jesus understands,

Jesus was the opposite of a capitalist.

If we just read his first sermon – what we know as “the beatitudes” – with its “blessed are the poor” –

it is clear that Jesus is turning everything on its head.

And it’s no surprise that that was Jesus’ outlook on life.

After all, he was raised by his mother, who, when God appeared to her through an angel

with a message that she would bare a son who would save his people from their sins,

responded by breaking into her version of the song of Hannah – the Magnificat –

proclaiming that God will pull down the mighty from their thrones and exalt those of low degree,

filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away empty.

No, Jesus, born of Mary, announced by the Essene John the Baptist,

and following in the long line of the prophets, was not preaching capitalism.

So what was Jesus preaching?

This has been one of those weeks in which I have found myself wrestling with this gospel, this word of God.

I missed our pastors’ text study this week because I was at Convocation,

but I was able to join Pastor Hoffman’s Bible study for the last 20 minutes later that evening.

As I’m sure you remember, one of the things that Pastor Hoffman is great about,

is reminding us of the context of the story.

And he was reminding us that this parable is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse.

Jesus has already entered Jerusalem and been hailed as the Messiah which has threatened the civil authorities.

He has already overturned the tables in the temple and kicked out the money changers

which has threatened the religious authorities.

He has quite deliberately set himself up to be betrayed, arrested, condemned, and killed.

He only has time from that Sunday’s entrance into the city until that Thursday evening at the last supper,

to make sure his disciples know all that they will need to know.

His thoughts are not on a nice stewardship temple talk about using our time, talent, & treasure. His mind is on

making sure that his followers understand that it’s not about following the letter of the law

but about loving God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength and one’s neighbor as oneself.

So at the Bible study, we were talking about the differences

between the three slaves who were left in charge when their master left –

the differences in how they acted, and the differences in how the master responded.

What struck us was that the two slaves knew their master –

knew him well enough to know what would please him,

and so, grounded firmly in that relationship, they were able to act with confidence and boldness

to do what they knew the master would expect them to do.

And sure enough, the master was pleased with their performance.

But there was something entirely different about that third slave.

He didn't see his master the way the other two saw him;
he didn't know his master the way the other two knew him.

Instead of trusting the master, he was afraid of him – and that fear kept him from doing anything.
And because he feared that his master would punish him,
he acted (or failed to act) in a way that got him exactly what he feared.

The point is, it really wasn't about the actions but about the relationship.

Knowing the master to be good, knowing what the master expected,
and trusting that knowledge to lead one's actions, led 2 slaves to actions that pleased the master.
Not knowing the master, not knowing what the master expected, and therefore not trusting,
kept the 1 slave from doing anything.

It was all about the relationship.

That's what I gleaned from the Bible study Tuesday evening.

But immediately after that, something very interesting happened! God-sighting alert!

I decided to check my notifications on Facebook.

And there was one from the ELCA against Gun Violence page with a review of a book
that reminds us that the veterans we celebrated last week fought to stop the fascism
that began in Germany and spread because no one stopped it
until it was too late and the whole world needed to go to war
and yet now fascism has arisen in our own country and we are just as blind to it
as were so many in those years leading up to World War II in Germany.

I wanted to share that post, and the thought that came into my mind was a quote –
something about evil happening when good men didn't do anything – or something like that.

I wanted to get the quote right so I googled it and found it right away:

“All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing” by Edmund Burke.

The quote was the beginning of an article, so I kept reading, and here comes the God-sighting!

It was about the parable of the talents!

In essence, the sin of that third slave was that he did nothing
and doing nothing allows evil to triumph.

Today is the next to last Sunday in the church year, and on these last Sundays of the church year,
our readings are about the end times.

You heard the words from Zechariah today, you heard the words of the psalmist,
and even in our letter from first Thessalonians, it's all about the end times
that people were expecting to happen before those who had known Jesus had all died.

I must admit that in my very Lutheran Mainline Protestant tradition,

I have dismissed my more evangelical siblings as being a little crazy
whenever they start talking about how we are in the end times, and the world may end any day.

I have always thought that human beings have been thinking that it's the end times
since probably the beginning of human history.

Certainly in the Bible, the prophets were always predicting the end,
Jesus talks about the end times, Paul talks about the end times,
Revelation talks about the end times, but I always have kind of laughed to myself because of course,
why would this be the end times any more than any other time in human history?

But when I look at the situation in Israel and Palestine, when I hear about the genocide in the Congo
which involves so many more people than in Israel and Palestine,

when I hear about the genocide in India, where people are being beheaded for being Christian,
it makes me wonder if maybe my Evangelical siblings might be seeing something I'm not.

When I look at the state of our country –

at the undermining of our American democracy and the limiting of our freedoms –
when I see the inability of government to get healthy, I wonder.

Those words in our first three readings today are pretty scary.
But here's the thing about the prophets.
God did not send them to tell people that it was too late, and there was no hope.
God sent the prophets to warn people that if they did not change their ways,
then they would suffer the consequences and they would lose,
but if they changed their ways, there was yet time.
Jesus came to stand against the current religious and civil authorities,
to stand in line with John the Baptist, and his mother, and the Hebrew prophets
who were always calling people back into right relationship with God,
and right relationship with ALL of their neighbors.

On Thursday evening I was on the synod anti-racism prayer call, and in my prayer I quoted Micah 6:8
about loving kindness and doing justice and walking humbly with God.
Later on in the prayer call someone gently corrected what I had said,
saying that they, too, had been thinking a lot about that passage,
and that they had come to the conclusion that they were pretty good at loving kindness,
but they weren't very good at doing justice.

Now before I go on to tell you about that prayer call,
I'd like us to think a minute about what the difference is between kindness and justice.

You may have heard that story
of a woman who noticed a baby floating downstream in the river; she rescued it.
Over the next few days, more babies were found floating downstream.
Soon the whole village was involved in the rescue effort.
While not all the babies could be saved, they were giving it all they had.
They were "loving kindness".
But then someone decided that maybe they should find out why so many babies were floating down the river.
He went to investigate and discovered that there was a big hole in the bridge.
It took a while for him to convince the others
to turn some of their efforts into repairing the bridge, but eventually they did.
That was "doing justice".
And by doing justice, they no longer had to do the exhausting work of kindness.

But back to the prayer call.
The woman who was praying pointed out that while she was better at loving kindness than doing justice,
the order of those commandments was not what I had quoted,
but rather the other way round: to do justice (first) and love kindness (second).
I looked it up, and she was right. Justice came first.

We don't want to let the babies float down the river without saving them.
We don't want there to be hungry people without feeding them.
But if that's all we do, we're just allowing more people to fall and to fail.

We Lutherans have always excelled at loving kindness, at doing social service;
but we have not excelled at doing justice, at doing social justice.

How do we do justice?
How can you and I do anything to stop the war in Israel and Palestine?
How can you and I fix our government in Washington?
How can you and I end racism in Connecticut?
How can you and I change the school system in Bridgeport?

Well, according to the parable, the first step is to know the master, God, well enough to know what it is that he requires.

Following scriptural principles is not a bad thing,
but if all we are doing is following a checklist,
and patting ourselves on the back when we do good things,
then we've missed the point, because inevitably, no matter what we do,
our actions will reflect our relationship with God,
and if we are walking in a day-to-day, intimate relationship with God,
we will realize that God brings people into our lives,
and situations and circumstances and opportunities into our lives
in order to lead us to that next step.

Every one of you has an opportunity to do one thing for justice this week
and that is to sign up for that book discussion, *The Myth that Made Us*,
Monday night or Tuesday morning.
You don't even have to read the book – just sit in on the free zoom discussion.
If you can't be there at those times, let me know
and maybe I can get a recording for you to watch.
I will do whatever it takes to help you take that step for justice.
In the end, if we want to do our part to solve problems
in the Middle East or the Congo or India,
or in Washington, or in Hartford, or in Bridgeport,
we need to walk hand-in-hand with God
and we need to follow wherever God leads and do whatever God requires.

All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing.
All it takes for evil to triumph is for us to trust in ourselves, and not in God.
All it takes for evil to triumph is for us to love kindness but fail to do justice.

God speaks through the Prophets and through the Psalmist, and through Jesus and through Paul,
not to condemn us, but to warn us.

And with the warning comes a promise and a hope.

When we love God with all that we are, we will do what God requires –

to do justice & love kindness – which will lead us to loving ALL our neighbors as ourselves.

Amen