

“THEY SHALL NOT HURT OR DESTROY”

JOSHUA 24: 15-18, ISAIAH 65: 17-25
MATTHEW 25:14-30

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

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In the late 1970's, Central American migrants began showing up on the Arizona border with Mexico. The Church community in Tucson first became aware that something new and quite troubling was taking place when a group of nearly thirty refugees from El Salvador was abandoned in the Sonoran desert by their coyote (paid smuggler) who was guiding them across the border. Half of the group died, and the other half survived by drinking their own perfume and urine. When the Border Patrol discovered them in the desert, they reached out to the faith community in Tucson for support in offering care to people who had been highly traumatized. Church folks who had been supporting migrant farmworkers for years realized that something new was happening – these were traditional, seasonal agricultural workers who were savvy about making annual crossings to the U.S. to find work – this was middle class Salvadorans who had no idea what they were doing: some of the women in that group had set out for a 100 mile hike through the Sonoran Desert wearing high-heeled shoes and silk stockings.

When they began investigating, they learned of the brutal military regimes and death squads (backed by the U.S. Government as it played out cold war politics with the Soviet Union in Central America), and they learned that when refugees fleeing the violence were picked up by U.S. Border Patrol, they were being held in detention in places like El Centro, CA, and then shipped back to the very governments that were threatening them in the first place. Since we had a law on the books (as we still do today) that says we the U.S. will offer safe haven to any person fleeing his/her country with a well-founded fear of prosecution because of their race, religion, membership in a social group, political opinion or nationality, they assumed that the best response would be to assure good legal assistance to Central American detainees who clearly had a demonstrable need for safe haven.

Their response is best told by Ann Crittenden in her remarkable book called “Sanctuary: A Story of American Conscience and the Law in Collision,” which I highly commend to you. Churches raided their endowments, church members took out second mortgages on their homes (these were the days before online crowd-funding), and dozens of volunteers hauled typewriters to El Centro and took over a motel next to the detention center. Together, they bonded out dozens of Central Americans and helped them to create their I-589’s – the documents necessary to apply for political asylum. When they did so, it became obvious that the geo-political conflict of the cold war meant that the Reagan Administration could never admit that they were fleeing political violence. Only a handful of applicants received asylum, while thousands were being deported in contravention of U.S. Law.

The people of Southside Presbyterian Church faced a choice at that point, and over the following decade (in a story way to challenging to recount this morning), they chose to open their sanctuary to provide shelter for more than ten thousand Central American refugees.

The Joshua text this morning recounts similar drama for the people of Israel, who have been wandering in the desert for a full generation and who now face a choice themselves. Rev. Otis Moss III frames the challenge before them like this:

“The central concern of this passage can be framed from the underside. An examination of economic, social and cultural factors will help nuance the text from the vantage point of the disinherited... Israel has moved from a landless, nomadic, former enslaved people to a community of “landed,” empowered, and budding military power. The people of Israel are no longer looked upon by the surrounding communities as insignificant, but they are now perceived as a military threat and a growing economic force able to use modern forms of metallurgy for imperial purposes.

Joshua’s covenant at Shechem is a speech only a privileged military leader who has lived on both sides of the Jordan could present. Choice is only offered to the privileged, the landed and the economically empowered. Choice is given to those who have options. Joshua gives the people a choice, an unlikely approach never offered by Moses, Joseph or Jacob. “

Walter Brueggemann, commenting on the same text, clarifies what is really at stake. on what’s at stake – “What this God requires is a life-commitment that will impinge upon every dimension of public life — social, political and economic. This God, so says Joshua, is uncompromising. With YHWH it is “all or nothing,” no casual allowance for accommodation. What is at issue is a jealous God who is committed to neighborly justice and the organization of the economy for the sake of the weak and vulnerable (thus the testimony of the book of Deuteronomy that stands behind this narrative chapter). But the other gods, the totems of agricultural self-sufficiency, do not require such neighborly passion. The either/or that Joshua presents has immediate practical

social consequences. A decision for YHWH entails socio-economic justice. A decision for the “other gods” leads inevitably to socio-economic exploitation, the accumulation of wealth at the expense of neighbors. Such a “religion” without commitment to social justice will eventuate in communities of economic failure.”

This is a moment of truth for the people of Israel. Do they stick with the God they have grown to depend on as they have wandered in the desert – the God who provides manna each morning, the God who leads Moses to strike the rock in the desert where water gushes forth, the God of a sharing economy? Or, do they embrace the gods that promise self-sufficiency in which one must build up reserves while others go hungry?

The negotiation leading into Schechem is raw, but in the end, Joshua insists, the people will be their own judges of their seriousness of intent.

The 25th Chapter of Matthew puts a similar choice before the first century Palestinians who were Jesus’ audience. The chapter is broken into three part: the first is the story of the three bridesmaids, which your pastor preached on last week. The second is the familiar “Parable of the Talents”, and the third is the equally familiar “judgment of the nations.” I would suggest that this is the chapter in which Matthew best sums up the Jesus project.

I am particularly appreciative of Tom’s reflection last week that a traditional reading of this text as a message to be ready for some future event that will happen at a time or place we cannot control is not helpful to us. Rather, as I read Tom’s sermon in preparation for our time together this morning, it seems to me that he is pushing us to a reflection on the importance of preparation – the work and intentionality that goes into full participation in the kingdom of God, or what Dr. King called “the Beloved Community.” “This is not easy work,” the author of Matthew seems to be saying, “and some of us will be unsuccessful in the attempt to participate in this new thing that God is creating.”

Let’s be honest, this passage seems to be all about polarization. It seems to delight that there are winners and losers, and it is deeply disturbing in the finality of the exclusion of the young women who came late to the party. That makes me uncomfortable on both a political and a theological level: Political because I have done my best over the past year not to participate in the divisiveness that marks our current political moment, and Theological because the traditional reading of the passage goes against pretty much every other teaching of Jesus – who constantly included others rather than excluding them.

I think Tom get’s it right, though. This story is saying “watch out!” Prepare yourselves for what new rules – a new way of understanding the meaning of community and a new renewed commitment to the jubilee household economy of the covenant God made with the People of Israel through Moses and renewed again at Shechem through Joshua.

And this morning, we get the next installment on the “new rules” that Jesus is aiming for.

I know how most of us were raised on to interpret the Parable of the Talents before us this morning. I won't fully rehearse it, but all of us have heard the importance of using our talents for God's purpose in the world. That reading assumes that this text is an allegory for the kingdom of God. I've always been deeply uncomfortable with this reading, however, largely because of the way the Master is portrayed, and self-affirmed, by the third slave. “You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, reaping where I did not so, and gathering where I did not scatter seed. Then you should have invested my money with the bankers that I would at least have received interest.”

But about fifteen years ago, I spent six months with the Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Central America (CEDEPCA), and Guatemalan pastors there helped me to re-interpret this text in an entirely different way. I believe that this text is not a description of the way things are in the kingdom of heaven, but instead a description of the way things actually operated in first century Palestine.

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves...” the parable begins. Note that unlike the story of the bridesmaids that precedes it, this story does not begin as a traditional allegory with the words “the kingdom of heaven is like...” Instead, it appears to describe the way things really were in Jesus' time. However, most Christians I know were raised on the story as another allegory for the kingdom of heaven. That reading always confounded me as a child hearing it in Sunday School or preached from the pulpit. We are told that a wealthy landowner (presumably God, as I was raised on it) gathers before him three trusted slaves and gives them varying amounts of his personal estate to manage during what will apparently be a long absence. To one slave he gives five talents, to another two, and to the third, one. Upon his return, the first and second slaves report that they have doubled their master's money, and the affirmation from the master could not be more positive, *“Well done, good and trustworthy slave. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.”*

The third slave, however, reports *“Master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your money in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”*

The master replies in a way anyone who has ever had to report failure to a harsh taskmaster would immediately recognize. *“Take the talent from him,” the master says, and throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* Just to be sure no one will miss the point, Jesus reports that the man also states the obvious – *“for to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, and for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”*

The message is obvious, I learned, from my place of privilege in the Presbyterian Church. “We must employ our God given talents in a way that pleases God.” But it never felt right to me. Why would God be portrayed as a harsh man, reaping where God has put no effort, and gathering where God has not prepared the soil? And why would this God respond to the third slave with a temper tantrum in which he is banished from the community? It wasn’t until I was well into my twenties, attending a Bible study led by colleagues from the Evangelical Center for Pastoral Studies in Guatemala, that I realized how poorly I understood the meaning of the text. “This is not an allegory for the Kingdom of Heaven,” they insisted. “This is a parable about the way things really were in first century Palestine.”

Wealthy landowners accumulated vast land holdings by making loans at exorbitant interest rates. Small farmers toiled to own their land outright, but they were beholden to wealthy debtors who charged impossible rates of interest. When the farmers couldn’t pay, the wealthy men repossessed the lands and added them to their own holdings, which were so large they had to travel for months at a time to oversee them all. A talent was the equivalent of fifteen years’ wage for a common laborer, so entrusting the first **slave** with five talents implied a lifetime of earnings.

This is a classic example of a text that has been re-interpreted to fit our understanding of ourselves as people of God. It’s not about using the abilities God has given us to God’s glory (however worthy that exercise might be), it is about the wealthy doubling their money on the backs of the poor. When we read the story through the eyes of the third slave, he becomes a hero who overcame his fear of an unjust master and found the courage to refuse to participate in the corrupt practices that would further impoverish his neighbors. In the end, he suffered the greatest consequence. Where the first two slaves were invited to enter into the economy of the privileged, “sharing in the joy of his master,” the third slave was banished from that community of privilege and had everything – every last thing – stripped away from him.

Read in this way, this story becomes a critically important lesson in what it will take to live faithfully in the midst of Empire. Though most of us are not the masters who control the workings of a global economy designed to impoverish the vast majority of the world’s people in order to provide unimaginable wealth to a relative handful of people, we are very much like the trusted slaves who are given a choice to participate in “reaping where we do not sow, and gathering where we do not scatter seed.” Like the third slave, we live with the real fear that if we question the system, we too may end up with nothing.

The third story in Matthew 25, which is the lectionary covers next week, clearly divides those who care for their sister and brother from those who don’t. I’ll leave it to Tom to parse out the challenges of that text, but the intent, read together with all of the rest of the chapter, seems clearly to me to establish the new rules that Jesus, and the author of Matthew, are building toward. In the new community that Jesus is trying to institute –

we will see a renewal of God's covenant with God's people once again. This will not be the harsh realities of a debt economy that the people know so well, but instead a new community in which we will care for one another. The people of God will feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger (WELCOME THE STRANGER), clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit those who are imprisoned.

The painful truth for those of us good Presbyterians who have been raised on moderation is that the sacred text before us this morning is all about divisiveness – Like the people of Israel – we too are being asked to choose.

Our choices today is as stark as it was in the time of Joshua and the time of Jesus. I doesn't matter who we have elected as our political leaders. The choice may feel more stark and more obvious to some of us in a time of Trump, but the truth is that the same choices were before us in a time of Barak Obama and would have been before us if we had elected Hilary Clinton a year ago this week.

Let's not get caught in the lies and false promises of other gospels that are presented us today just as they were in Joshua's time or in Matthews time. Let's be clear about where we stand and who we will serve. There is no space in the banquet hall for those who are not prepared to make this choice with Jesus. There is no room for the prosperity gospel of me first, pull yourself up by your bootstraps, everyone for themselves, take what you need first for yourself and your family, build a wall on the border, bomb those with whom we disagree, disenfranchise and imprison people of color, no health care for pre-existing conditions.

Thirty years later, Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson continues to be a model for what it means to be a church of the covenant of Moses and Joshua and Matthew's Jesus. Alison Harrington, their pastor, describes the theological challenge this way:

The empire would like us to choose fear. After all, the business of empire is the manufacturing and marketing of fear: fear that what we have is not enough and that there is someone out there who will arrive at our door and take from us not only our much cherished quality of life but our life itself. And once this fear takes root in our hearts and minds, the empire convinces us that we need a bigger and stronger military, we need war, we need prisons, we need walls and more walls — around our homes, around our communities, and around our nation. Within this empire of fear, love of the stranger is anathema.

At Southside, we believe that we are called to be a people of faith who proclaim the radical love of Jesus Christ within this empire of fear and anxiety. We believe that within a context of increasing acts of violence and a narrative of fear of the other, whether it be workers from Mexico or refugees from Syria, the only antidote to fear is not more walls, not more security, but more love, for the only real secure community is the beloved

community. In the midst of these anxious, contentious and fearful times, for better or worse, we chose love.

Isaiah proclaims the vision:

They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.

May God give us the strength to renew the covenant of Moses and Joshua and to embrace the vision of Isaiah and Jesus in our own troubled times.

(Quotes of Brueggemann of Moss can be seen in their full context in their commentaries referenced by Textweek.com. Quote from Alison Harrington can be referenced in the first Chapter of my book "Faithful Resistance: Gospel Visions for the Church in a Time of Empire.")