

St. Andrew's UMC
November 16th, 2008
Matthew 25:14-30
"To Him Who Has, More Will Be Given"

The portion of the reading that we have heard this morning is just about the only text in the New Testaments that puts making a profit in the positive light. In the New Testaments in general, material gain is basically looked upon as opposed to one's spiritual pursuits, and is not considered as part of the spiritual discipline.

Here Jesus positively affirms the activity of making a profit, by telling that the master expected to make a profit from his investments. It would be foolish to invest one's resources into something that will not turn up a profit. From this, we assess that Jesus viewed one's ability to make a profit as a desirable trait. That is why he used it in his parable, obviously.

Jesus compares in this chapter the kingdom of Heaven to a series of examples. One of the examples is about the man who gave money to his slaves, and instructed them to go out and work it. One received 5 talents, another 2, and the third one, 1. When the master returned, he called his slaves and accounted for his investment. The one who had 5 talents made 5 more. The one with 2 talents made 2 more. The one with 1 talent decided to keep it buried in the ground, and gave it back to his master, saying,

"I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

The master got angry, and told the slave:

"You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest!"

The master makes it clear that the slave was expected to turn up a profit with his master's money. So he ordered him to be thrown out of the household.

When it comes to understanding the scriptures, or interpreting the scriptures, people usually behave this way: They interpret the Bible in the way that is beneficial to themselves, and apply it in the way that is advantageous to themselves. Whether they have been trained in a respected academic institution, or barely graduated from an elementary school, it makes not much difference. They all believe God is on their side, and blesses them over others. People tend to see well the side that is theirs, but have difficulty seeing others'. I am afraid that that is largely true for the believers of other religions, as well.

I read this week a newspaper article about a Catholic priest in Greenville , SC , who advised his parishioners to refrain from taking communion, if they voted for Barack Hussein Obama. This is an excerpt from the pastoral letter:

“Voting for a pro-abortion politician when a plausible pro-life alternative exists constitutes material cooperation with intrinsic evil, and those Catholics who do so place themselves outside of the full communion of Christ's Church and under the judgment of divine law. Persons in this condition should not receive Holy Communion until and unless they are reconciled to God in the Sacrament of Penance, lest they eat and drink their own condemnation.”

And surely, the alternative ticket was a totally righteous in God' eyes, as the priest assumes.

Now, if we want to split hairs about one's affiliation with evil, how about all the killings which the Catholic Church did in the course of the Church history, including the Inquisition and the collusion with the Nazis? By the same logic, wouldn't that have put every confessing Catholic's soul in jeopardy, by the membership in the church? Well, we have to be fair. Let's dig up some dirt on others. The Catholic Church is not the only religion that killed. How about the Mormons?

On September 11, 1857, the followers of Brigham Young who was the governor of the Utah territory, massacred over 120 men, women, and children of the Fancher wagon train after 5 days of siege in Mountain Meadows. The Fancher party had surrendered to the Mormons their weapons and all their worldly belongings under the terms of truce. They were of Methodist and Presbyterian faiths, and were emigrants from Arkansas .

Lest United Methodists feel self-righteous, I must remind that on November 29, 1864, a Methodist lay preacher and U.S. Cavalry officer, Col. John M. Chivington, carried out the Sand Creek Massacre which was planned and led against the peaceful and unsuspecting Indian village in this unprovoked attack. Over 200 victims were killed, and they were mostly women and children, who were the Arapaho and Cheyenne Indian tribes in Colorado .

If we want to trace the culpability, there are plenty of bones to accuse just about anyone by association, based on this “material cooperation with intrinsic evil.” Such was precisely the perspective that also justified the condemnation of so many innocent people to die on September 11, 2001, just for being Americans, for living in the U.S. Whether one voted for Obama or for Bush or for any president, as long as the president is not righteous in the eyes of the Lord, one has cooperated with intrinsic evil, as the priest’s logic goes.

The point here is that in one’s serious and deepest meditation of the scriptures, the best interpretation and application of the scriptures based on the firm conviction of the faith is often selfish and self-oriented, and totally blind to other ambiguities of life. I am reminded of Jesus’ warning:

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye (Mt. 7:3)?”

So the interpretation of our text as subjugated to the base instincts goes like this: Since it is in the Bible, it is theologically sound to pursue one’s profit in the commercial enterprises. Therefore, it is pleasing to God to harvest 100% of the profit. How many mutual funds return 100% of profit nowadays? Now we have the scriptural foundation to pursue 100% profit over the investments or businesses,

because that is the way the kingdom of Heaven expects us to make money! Yes, we can deal with this kind of money-making spirituality any day.

According to this interpretation, Rockefeller and Exxon-Mobil embody the kingdom of Heaven to share the joy of the Lord, as far as their profit-making is concerned.

But then again, what about those who fail to bring profit for the master? What about all the banking and auto industries lining up for the government handouts to bail them out? They failed to bring the profit! Maybe instead of getting the government handouts, as the Bible tells us in no uncertain terms, they should be kicked out, and left in the dark to gnash their teeth!

If we are level-headed, and resist against our base instincts such as profit-mongering and self-justification, we would notice that Jesus was not really proposing a materialistic, profit-oriented kingdom of Heaven. Jesus was employing the subject of profit making which everyone could catch, in order to promote the understanding of the kingdom of Heaven .

In the kingdom of Heaven, God gives each individual gifts and graces, and I quote, “to each according to his or her abilities.” God makes the distinction according to the differences in the abilities of the individuals, and gives different amount of gifts and graces according to the ability.

God expects that those who are given the talents bring in the profit, whether one received 5 talents, 2 talents, or just 1 talent. God expects that our lives be profitable, and that we do something with our God-given gifts and graces. Our lives are designed to become meaningful by reaping the profit from the God-given gifts and graces.

Here, we face another pitfall of interpretation. We interpret that we are the ones who are supposed to keep the profit. No, it is God who owns the profit. We are the stewards of these talents. The profit-oriented base instincts lead us to believe that whatever we accomplish is under our disposal to be used for our aggrandizement

and our indulgence. The stewards are supposed to bring glory to their master's name, not to themselves.

Everyone knows Jonas Edwards Salk (1914-1995) developed the polio vaccine. While being interviewed by Edward R. Murrow on See It Now in 1955, Salk was asked: "Who owns the patent on this vaccine?" Surprised by the question's assumption of the requirement of a profit motive for his creation, he responded: "There is no patent. Could you patent the sun? (Wikipedia)"

This story could well have been a modern parable of the kingdom of Heaven . Even though Jesus used the story of profit making, the kingdom of Heaven is not about profit making for one's self, or for the ownership of assets. The kingdom of Heaven is about profit making by using God-given talents to benefit the humankind. That is how we glorify God's name, and that is how we give meaning to our lives. Sadly, many mistakenly believe that it is the ownership of assets that makes life meaningful, and they pray to the idolatrous god to bless them and exalt them. Just as the road that leads to death is wide and many travel upon it, many gather to hear such messages.

This is how it works in the kingdom of Heaven : if we use our gifts and graces for humankind's benefits, even more gifts and graces will be given to us. If we refuse to use our gifts and graces, then the gifts and graces will be taken from us, and be given to others who will turn up profit with them.