

## A Different Way

We humans are masters at taking the very strange, radical, even revolutionary challenges of Jesus and turning them into something more to our liking.

And so our Roman Catholic friends create a church that looks like the Roman empire, with the pope taking the place of the emperor, and various ranks of clergy taking the place of the elite power brokers.

Meanwhile, the Protestant reformation became a golden opportunity to infect the church with the newly growing system of capitalism – – tying salvation to financial success.

The phrase “Protestant work ethic” grew precisely out of that situation, as we began to see material enrichment as evidence of God’s blessings, and the inevitable poverty that capitalism creates, as evidence of God’s curse.

And each of these systems spend a great deal of time creating rules and laws.

They are consumed with setting out what behavior is acceptable and what is not; ignoring the fact that Jesus gives us only one law: “love one another”; that Jesus gives us only one command: “do not judge!”

In the last hundred years or so, in the midst of a society that worships the individual, Christianity, among many Catholics and Protestants, has come to be defined as an entirely “personal relationship with Jesus” rather than a call to remake the earth, so that earth more nearly resembles heaven, by forming communities that seek love and forgiveness and non-violence.

Every generation of Christians therefore needs to rediscover who and what Jesus is all about, and who and what he calls us to become.

Like caterpillars whose destiny is to be changed into butterflies, if we have the courage to practice a life of letting go, we can change from a faith that is merely a sop to the status quo into a faith that really can move mountains.

And the parables Jesus tells are our roadmap to that place of transformation.

In every generation the parables take a sledgehammer to our watering down of the strange invitation of Jesus, helping us move a step closer to the actual kingdom of God.

So it is with today's parable, which is a direct assault on our way of living, because our way of living is all about development and growth and making money whenever and wherever we can.

In a sense, we are lucky these days because the wisdom of what Jesus has to say stares at us from just about every headline every morning.

Climate change caused by our addiction to fossil fuels is already melting glaciers and causing decades of ever increasing average temperatures around the world, leading to inevitable sea level rises which are even now making some south Pacific islands uninhabitable - not to mention the routine ocean flooding in major cities like Miami, and Waikiki.

This year's fruit production, from mango to avocado, is way down, probably because pollinating bees are dying at alarming rates, most likely due to our love affair with pesticides, while the new president of Brazil

has just announced an assault on the the lungs of our planet, the Amazon rain forest.

Indeed, as my dear friend reflected last week, the struggle at Mauna Kea is about far more than the sacredness of the mountain or even the rightful claims of the Hawaiian people - what's at stake at Mauna Kea may very well be the fate of humankind.

The struggle for the piko of the Hawaiian people underscores the truth that unless we learn to live sustainably, in harmony with creation, we will surely die - having destroyed what sustains us.

And it's not only on this vast scale that the words of Jesus, perhaps now more than ever, are urgently needed.

What happens to us, as individuals, families and communities, in a system that transforms citizens into consumers, and these days, transforming consumers into data points?

What happens to us as we live and breathe a culture that measures human worth not by one's kindness, generosity or compassion, but by the size of one's bank account?

What happens to us when the President of the United States constantly seeks to cut the ties that bind us to one another?

Here in Hawaii we still have, thanks particularly to our Hawaiian and Asian traditions, strong family and community ties.

Yet this great gift of community is constantly bombarded by the broader culture that champions the rich, the handsome, the strong.

We see it in multimillion dollar condos going up like weeds in Kakaako while thousands of our local people are barely holding on, or are in the street already.

We see it in the obscenity of corporate bigwigs gorging on, not 20 times but 400 times, what the average worker earns.

All of which brings us to the feet of today's parable.

Here is the rich man, speaking only to himself, planning only with himself, seeking to benefit only himself.

He is like so many of us: independent, self-reliant, needing no one.

It is a fool's errand as God, heartbroken, says to the man: "look what you have done to yourself!

You plan alone, build alone, indulge alone, and now ... you will die alone..."  
Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 67.

Many preachers try hard to take the bite out of this parable.

We say: "The problem isn't wealth, it's how we use it."

That's what we say, but it's not what Jesus says.

St. Paul gets where Jesus is coming from.

Paul, sitting with the Risen Christ, comes to see that God intends for people to work for just two reasons:

First, so we aren't a burden to others, and second, to have resources to give to those in need.

How different from our culture, which teaches us to work in order to accumulate wealth, so that I can retire to the good life, to eat, drink and be merry!

It is this disconnect between the original purpose of work, and our distortion of that purpose, that today's parable comes at us, like a punch in the eye!

(Which is why we have the old saying, "the truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable!").

And yet, none of this is intended as a scold or as judgment.

Rather, look at what Jesus does in today's gospel.

He tells that young man who wants "justice" from his brother that when you chase after that kind of justice, you only get hurt, you only get a war.

How much money is worth a ruined relationship between brothers?

As St. Augustine says "God gives us people to love and things to use; sin happens when we confuse the two."

Today's gospel is a stark wake up call, especially to we rich of this world, that all we have is gift, that our lives and all material blessings are on loan to us, we don't own any of it, we're only borrowers, caretakers.

As Paul urges us this morning, "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: ... passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient."

It's not that these things make God mad.

The "wrath of God" is simply shorthand for the foreseeable consequences of living in a way doomed for destruction, like driving a car over a cliff: God doesn't cause the calamity, the driver does!

The root of our faith is to draw us out of ourselves, and into the lives of one another, for only then can we in fact become who we are always meant to be.

In this drawing out, we come to see that "love demands a complete inner transformation - for without this, we cannot possibly identify with our fellow human beings.

We have to become, in some sense, the people we love.

And this involves a kind of death of our own self.

No matter how hard we try, we resist this death: we fight back with anger, with recriminations, with demands, with ultimatums.

We seek any convenient excuse to break off and give up on this difficult task.

And yet, if we do not break all spiritual chains, cast off the domination of all misguided compulsion, and find our true selves, if we don't discover and develop our spiritual liberty and use it to build up God's kingdom

here and now; if we don't, what will become of us?" Merton, *The Desert Fathers*, 18-20, paraphrased.

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