

November 16, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

A Parable of Responsibility and Accountability

Psalm 123

...we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than its fill of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

'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.'

Psalm 123 is a cry for help to withstand the disdain and arrogance of others. We don't know what the specific circumstances were that triggered the psalmist's complaint. Yet, I think we all have felt the need for help in sustaining our faith in the midst of false values and illusions and distractions. Norman Fischer is a Zen Buddhist teacher. He spent a week at the Abbey of Gethsemane, Thomas Merton's monastery in Kentucky, and was deeply impressed by the chanting of psalms in the daily offices. Fischer wrote his own translations of some of the psalms (OPENING TO YOU: Zen-Inspired Translations of the Psalms). In this psalm, Fischer makes the outward "enemies" into the inward struggles we have as we resist succumbing to the things that would distract us from what really matters. Listen to Fischer's rendering of the last lines of the psalm:

"For we are diminished and dimmed with the world's opinions/Diminished and dimmed with possession and worry/With accomplishment's undertow/With reputation's crazy wind/Oppressed by the disdaining other/Inside and out." Psalm 123 is an expression of our deep desire to not be swallowed up by aspects of life around us that "diminish" us, that draw us away from what is good and true.

I heard a similar tone in the reading from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians. The writer reminds the community that they are "children of light and of the day," not "children of darkness and the night." Following Jesus has opened to them God's love, and they have found their true humanity as persons created and loved by God. They lived, as do we now, in a culture that challenged such awareness at every turn. False and empty cultural and societal values. Violence. Materialism. Greed. Ego-centered living. The images of drunkenness and falling asleep

mean what happens to us when we ingest these surrounding “spirits.” We grow numb to who we really are and the kind of life to which we are called and for which we are created. The writer urges the community to remain sober and awake. The word the writer uses that is translated “sober” (*nepho*) means also well-balanced, moderate, self-controlled, or we might also say disciplined. It is the life of love, awareness, caring, simplicity and generosity, of self-examination, reflection, and self-understanding. A friend recently said to me, “We are all in recovery”. We are all affected, or diminished, by the culture in which we live that is addicted to war, greed, individualism, competition, material prosperity, and behavior that dishonors people and the earth. And we all need to wake up from those addictions to our true selves.

In this sense, the community of Jesus is a community of recovery. We are all getting free from the attachments, addictions, behaviors, illusions, all the things that have put us to sleep, that have numbed us to our true identities as God's children, made in love and made for love. That is why the writer keeps coming back to the same refrain: Encourage one another. The word here (*parakaleo*) has a fullness of meaning—encourage, exhort, comfort, cheer up, console. To me, this is what we mean when we talk about and work with “accountability”. But I will come back to that at the end.

Our reading from Matthew focuses on a specific issue of the spiritual life. The two servants who invested their master's money and multiplied it lived with a willingness to risk so that something more could happen, so that the money, in this case, could grow. The third servant lived conservatively, not wanting to lose what he had, gripping tightly what was entrusted to him. He embodies Jesus' other teaching: Those who hang onto or grasp their lives will lose them. Those who lose, or give, their lives for my sake and for the gospel will find their lives. (Matt 16:24f; Mk 8:34f; Lk 9:23f)

Now, none of this—today's parable - nor any of Jesus' other teachings - has anything to do with making money and getting rich. Jesus is talking about living with a willingness to let go, to risk, to use whatever we have been given to multiply love and life, to increase goodness and joy and justice. The parable is about the gifts we are given—the gift of life itself, as well as the particular abilities or gifts we each have. We live our lives, not with a sense of ownership, but stewardship. We understand that anything and all that we have is entrusted to us. Our true and deepest joy is found, not in clinging to our lives and what we have, but using whatever we have and whoever we are to nourish and nurture life around us.

In the story, one servant gets five talents, another two, another one. A “talent” was a sum of money worth about fifteen years' wages of a laborer. Even the servant who gets one talent has an enormous sum. We should not feel sorry for him. To me, these huge sums of money indicate that life is abundance, not scarcity, that we each have everything we need to live fully, far more

blessings and goodness than we are even aware of. The only thing that makes it seem otherwise is our tendency, shaped in us by the culture around us, to be discontent and dissatisfied, always wanting more or better. This makes us as soul-sick as the psalmist.

The man apportions different amounts for differing abilities. Not everyone is the same. The parable speaks of a simple reality of life as we observe it. Some have more abilities than others, but each has something to offer. We need to be careful here. We are aware that there are those who seem more capable or gifted or whatever than we ourselves are. We are quick to measure ourselves against others. We do this in the religious community. We love to lift up the “saints,” those who have lived extraordinary lives of sacrifice and so forth. I grew up in a minister’s family, and we frequently hosted missionaries coming to visit the churches my father served. I would sit in our living room and listen to wondrous stories of compassion, courage, and healing in Africa or India or South America. These were larger than life persons, and we were urged to emulate them.

The problem with lifting up some as extraordinary, however, is that it can foster the tendency to measure ourselves against others. That is why I do not like talking about spiritual heroes. It is okay to be inspired by others’ lives. However, it easily ends up being a distraction, causing us to take our eyes off our own lives and gifts and callings, whatever they may be. There are different capabilities. Some may achieve “bigger” things than others. That’s just the way it is. But Jesus is not interested in spiritual hero-worship or competition. The point is to receive the richness of our own lives, to receive and embrace our own lives, who we are and what we have been given. If we do that faithfully, we will be surprised at how we will nourish life around us and at the deep joy we experience. An important part of our inward journey work is dropping the mental habits of comparison and self-measuring. The thing is to know who we are and what we have been entrusted with. There is no small thing. Big and small do not enter into it. We never know what will happen as we are faithful to the gifts and callings entrusted to us. Faithfulness is ours; the results belong to God.

The first two servants go out and invest the master’s assets. When the master returns, they bring him his money with interest. He responds: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into my joy.” They took what they had and made something of it. This is a familiar theme with Jesus. The life of faith is about risk, opening ourselves up, enlarging our hearts, stepping out in trust. The opposite of faith is not doubt, or disbelieving some religious doctrine. It is playing it safe, shrinking back, grasping onto security. The life of faith means questioning, searching, finding out for ourselves, being open, not closed, letting go, not grasping.

The servants’ reward is joy of their master. And, since they were “faithful over a little”,

they are “put in charge of more”. The reward of faithfulness is entering into the joy of God, of life, and more faithfulness! There is a Jewish saying: The reward for keeping the Law is more keeping of the Law. Or we might put it this way: The reward for loving as God has loved us is more loving as God has loved us! The reward for showing kindness is more kindness. The reward for generosity is more generosity. And so on. Growing in our capacity to live by faith is its own reward because it is coming home to our true selves. We struggle to live a life of faith in order to live the way we were made to live, to be who we were made to be. As Rabbi Joshua Heschel wrote: “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.”

The third servant played it safe. He did not lose it, but neither did he make anything with it. The master is indignant. “You wicked and lazy servant! You did this because you were afraid of what I would do if you lost my money.” The parable takes a harsh turn here. The one talent is taken away from that servant and given to the one who had the most. The order is given to cast the servant into darkness and punishment. Jesus tells parables to deepen our understanding of what it means to live in the kingdom of God, life as God created it to be lived. Jesus is teaching a deep spiritual reality here. When we approach life conservatively, fearfully, always taking the most secure route, never risking anything, grasping our life, and our money, tightly for fear of losing it—what happens? We suffocate. Life shrinks. We end up losing instead of gaining. I think that the third servant allowed his fear to dictate his life. I think that the other two may have had the same fear, but they did not let it determine how they would live. It is not about never having fear, that we might fail or mess up or whatever. It is about being afraid but living open-handedly and open-heartedly anyway! It is about growing in our capacity to be at home with uncertainty, with risk, with openness and generosity of spirit.

Some of Jesus’ parables have these harsh endings. We prefer nicer endings, and maybe a spirituality that is always warm and cozy. However, the most profound spiritual traditions know that there are some truths that are so crucial that they need to be said in as strong, even shocking, a way as possible. This is so that we really pay attention to what is most important, so that we do not miss the life God created us to live because we are distracted by lesser things. In the words of 1 Thessalonians 5, these teachings are so that we sober up and stay awake, and remember that we are children of the light and of the day.

All of this lifts up the importance of what we call in our community “accountability,” helping one another stay on track, discern our gifts and callings, and continue growing in our relationship with God. I like the word Paul uses in his letter to the Thessalonian community. Encouragement. Sometimes being reminded. Sometimes consoling. Sometimes just listening. Sometimes a word of challenge, sometimes of cheerfulness. Accountability is how we give and receive the help and support we need to continue our recovery FROM the culture in which we live

and our recovery OF our true selves. It is how we remember who we are, and whose we are.