

Enter into Joy

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I Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

I get a bit nervous talking about the second coming of Christ. In my experience talk of apocalypse usually returns to Revelation as a source of literal prophecy. That horrifying imagery is then used as a threat against “unbelievers.” We don’t want to be “left behind,” and “I wish we’d all been ready,” ‘cause “there’s no time to change your mind.”

When those types of assumptions are firmly in place, it is easy to zero in on other verses of the New Testament that conform to our apocalyptic vision and give those passages a type of primacy that they don’t really call for. Such is the case with the two readings this morning. Both deal with the return of Christ (or the Day of the Lord). Both use somewhat scary language for what will happen. In Thessalonians, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night ... sudden destruction will come upon them ... and there will be no escape.” And in Matthew, the wicked slave is thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

So, yes, there is some scary language going on here. It can easily suck us down into the pit of despair. But what is the intent of these verses? How are we to read them not from an imported Revelations-based perspective, but based on the merits and context of the fuller passages?

First of all, neither passage is really written as a warning against hell or the end times. Rather, the ‘threat’ acts as sort of a foil. Sort of like “You’ll shoot

your eye out.” It is not presented as an arbitrary threat, and it is certainly not intended as a tool for scaring people into a post-mortem heaven. In both passages, rather, hell and the end times are presented as potential consequences of inaction.

The point of these passages is not to scare us out of inaction, but rather to invite participation in God’s work. The intent is not to use fear as a motivation. In fact, the character in the Matthew story who is motivated by fear is the one who messes up. The motivation here is in the other direction.

The real center of the Matthew story is God’s absurd generosity and our response to it. If you have footnotes in your bible, you might check to see what the conversion rate for a “talent” is. According to mine, five talents is equal to 30,000 denarii. One denarius was the wage for one day of work by a laborer. So this is an absolute fortune. A laborer toiling every day except the Sabbath would have to work for 95 years to earn five talents. Assuming a rather modest \$10 per hour laborer rate, this works out to 2.4 million bucks. This isn’t just a boss handing over a handful of cash that needs to be protected — this is Bill Gates entrusting corporate managers with substantial company resources. This makes it a bit easier for me to wrap my head around what happens to the third manager. Entrusted with something important, he squandered what could have been. Apparently in the going market, a savvy manager could double an investment. (Sounds good, doesn’t it?) But the third manager doesn’t even manage to generate interest. So he loses his job; he is removed from his position within the work of the master. This isn’t maliciousness on the part of the master — rather, it

was a choice on the part of the manager to not participate in and further the master's business.

The two managers who participated in the master's work receive a beautiful invitation. Because they were trustworthy, they can "enter into the joy" of their master. I find it interesting that though it would be fairly easy to interpret this entire parable as being about reward or punishment after death, in context that interpretation falls short. In particular, the reward for the faithful managers includes being given more responsibility. This is how they enter into the joy of the master. Taking part in the master's work is their source of joy. On the other hand, opting out of the master's work is seen as frustration and misery.

This parable can also be distorted towards the "health and wealth" gospel: we see people given money, being praised for their faith for making more money, and being rewarded with more money. That interpretation ignores the simple fact that the money does not belong to the servants at any point in the story. The talents are resources intended for the furtherance of the master's work, not for the personal benefit of the servants.

What does God give us in abundance? Where do we experience overwhelming generosity? And what do we do with it?

I wonder what would happen if we began to look at everything we have as manifestations of God's love for us. Everything is a commodity that we can choose how to use — not simply for our own benefit, but as a response to God's generosity. God entrusts love to us, and we respond by multiplying that love. The Thessalonians passage reminds us that "God destined us not for wrath but for

obtaining salvation through Jesus.” Participating in and sharing God's love is salvation. It is our purpose and our call.

Love is a commodity afforded to us in incredible measure. The indescribable subtleties of creation, the balance of darkness and light, the turning of seasons and the cycles of birth and death are expressions of Love. God grants us love beyond measure — even becoming one of us to express the fullness of love. Jesus is love incarnate. How can we respond to and share this incarnation? How can we be faithful stewards of this ultimate expression of God's faith in us?

We live out our call by continuing the incarnation. We are Christ's body — the presence of Christ on earth. Once, God incarnated Christ and we knew him as one body, one man — and now we multiply that gift. We are one body in millions of bodies — millions of individuals united in common purpose. We who follow Christ are love incarnate and expressions of God's love for creation.