

Your Master's Happiness

(MATTHEW 25:20-23 NRSV) *Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.'* ²¹ *His master said to him, '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.'* ²² *And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.'* ²³ *His master said to him, '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.'*

How do you picture heaven? Floating around on white clouds, wearing white robes and playing a harp? I think I'd like to be able to play a harp.

The book of Revelations in the New Testament paints a word picture of a city with diamond walls, gates of pearl, and streets of gold; a city of eternal light, with an fountain flowing endlessly with fresh, life-giving water; and in the center of the city is great white throne where God is seated, surrounded by all the saints. Everyone there is a part of a great, celestial choir, singing praises to God. I know some of you would love to be able to sing, and might look forward to that.

Some say we have to take that picture in Revelations literally; while others say it's metaphor, indicating that whatever it's like, heaven is wonderful beyond anything we can experience or even imagine.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word is usually plural: "heavens", and refers to the sky. There is a sense, at least, in which we can conclude from the Hebrew Scriptures that the dwelling place of God is in the heavens; but there are no direct references to humans sharing that realm. Instead, the relationship between God and humanity is lived out on earth, with the Holy Presence coming down to share life here in the midst of God's creation.

So, for the most part, the Hebrew idea of a life shared with God was tied to the earth: a land. God said to Abraham, "Come to a land that I will show you." Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage toward the "Promised Land". The love of "the land" was rooted in a conviction that it was a divine legacy to them. The theme song from the movie, "Exodus" begins, "This land is mine; God gave this land to me."

In the period of exile after Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem there grew a belief that a "Messiah"—a divinely-anointed leader—would lead Israel and restore "the kingdom" once again as the dominant political and military power in the world.

That was the Jewish understanding when Jesus began his ministry: the "Kingdom of God", the "Kingdom of Heaven". Jesus took the doctrine to new levels, freeing it from political and geographical boundaries, and saying that wherever God reigns, **there** is "the kingdom of heaven."

"My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21).

And great portions of Jesus' teachings are geared to helping people understand what "the kingdom of heaven" is like: it's not a place; it's not related to location. It goes beyond time and space. "The Kingdom of Heaven" is a condition of living under the sovereignty of God.

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who had two sons.

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who found a treasure in a field.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed.

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (MAT 19:14NIV)

"Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. (Matthew 25:14)

And there is a sense of urgency about the "Kingdom of Heaven": "The Kingdom is *at hand*." It's "right here." It stands at the door and knocks (Luke 12:36, cf. Rev. 3:20). Who will open and let it in? Who will say yes to its coming? Over and over again in the Gospels we hear the radical urgency of its call. It is a pearl of great price; you sell everything you have to get it (Matt. 13:45-46). When it calls you leave father and mother, wife and family, as if you hated them (Luke 14:26). It transcends all earthly concerns (Matt. 6:33). If it were a question of gouging out your eye and entering it blind or having two eyes and being excluded from it, you would without hesitation mutilate yourself in order to get in (Mark 9:47).

This is not a trivial call. One does not put one's hand to the plow and then turn back (Luke 9:62)! This is not a call to be answered with a smidgen of moral improvement, a few New Year's resolutions! It is a call to total and radical obedience, to an utterly impossible righteousness, to be perfect as God is perfect (Matt. 5:48): in short, it is a call to a righteousness which no human can attain.

AND YET, IT IS IN THE MIDST OF THIS HIGH-DEMAND CALL TO RADICAL OBEDIENCE THAT WE HEAR THE INVITATION: "COME AND SHARE YOUR MASTER'S HAPPINESS."

And the verbs are present tense: "come now; share now your master's happiness." We're more accustomed to thinking of the kingdom of heaven—sharing the master's happiness—as something we wait for; something in the future; something after this life is over.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, we're walking this lonesome valley; we're enduring; we're struggling with responsibilities and financial worries and health issues and broken relationships. Some are dealing with the reality of failure. As the old saying goes,

"When you're up to your armpits in alligators it's hard to remember your original purpose was to drain the swamp."

The good news is that the kingdom of heaven transcends time and space: it always has been, is now, and always will be. It is here, and yet it is not bound or limited to this place or any other place.

The good news is that, right here, right now in the middle of the swamp, up to our armpits in alligators, the invitation is offered: "Come and share your master's happiness."

Come and share the happiness of knowing that whatever your situation may be, nothing on this earth is permanent; and God has given you everything you need to move beyond where you are to where you can be.

Come and share the happiness that God loves us, just as we are; but the better news is that God loves us too much to leave us where we are.

Come and share the happiness that God has a plan, and, like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle, you fit into that plan—you have a place in God's plan. God won't place you there. God won't force it on you; but God will lead you to that place if you will follow.

In the 1970s at First Christian Church in Claremore, Oklahoma, there was an elder named Ed Hausenfluck. He was farmer. He looked like Popeye, bless his heart; and I don't know anybody that didn't love Ed. He was loving and kind and just kind of radiated a spiritual presence.

Everybody especially loved his prayers at the Lord's Table. Beautiful prayers; but over the years I couldn't help noticing they were very repetitious. Then it occurred to me that we repeat Christmas every year, and we love it. We repeat Easter every year and we love it. We celebrate our birthday every year, we love it.

People looked forward to Ed's prayers at the table—kind of like repeating the Lord's Prayer every week: it's comforting, like a pair of well-worn slippers. We all need that from time-to-time.

But it was the ending of Ed's prayers that spoke most to me. Every prayer ended with, "Guide us in paths of service, for there is no greater joy than to be in Thy service. Amen."

That's one of the great paradoxes of Christianity: what would probably be a drudgery and a burden under most circumstances turns out to be a source of joy when offered to the Lord. "There is no greater joy than to be in Thy service."

That's where it begins. And then we are able to hear the invitation: "Come and share the joy of your Master."

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