

Meantime and Endtime

Two weeks ago on All Saints Sunday I said how much I like the special days in the church calendar that give us a greater perspective. I didn't know how much perspective I had lost because of the pandemic until I read the lessons for today. Wait a minute, I thought. These are talking about the end times. That must mean the long season of Pentecost is drawing to a close. Sure enough, next Sunday is Christ the King Sunday. After that is the First Sunday of Advent and we begin a new church year. When I realize that we started dealing with this pandemic in the middle of Lent, there's no wonder we are all so weary!

The end of Pentecost and the beginning of Advent focus on the end times to remind us of the second coming of Christ before we turn to his first coming at Christmas. Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians is full of the day of the Lord. Like Jesus' parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids that was a reading last week, Paul's message is simple: prepare. Be ready. Don't think you can predict when Jesus will come. Paul uses the analogy of a thief coming in the night, a good one if not the most pleasant.

Paul's preparations for the end are not what we would think. We'd expect him to tell us to pray and go to church and give money to charitable causes (like the church). Instead he wrote, "Let us keep awake and be sober." Stay alert. Don't get weighed down by sleep or drunkenness. There's a battle ahead, so be ready. Curiously, Paul didn't mention any weapons for the battle. He advocated a good defense – the *breastplate* of faith and love and the hope of salvation for a *helmet*. Again we see Paul's favorite trio: faith, hope, and love.

Paul talks about the endtime and what to do in the meantime. So does Jesus. In this week's parable, a man of means went on a journey, entrusting each of his slaves with a sum of money. A close reading shows that the master knew them well and treated them accordingly. The best slave, who got the most, went off *at once* – immediately – and just as quickly doubled what he had. The second slave also doubled his allotment, although perhaps more slowly. The third one, who was given the least, did the least with it. Perhaps he was petrified to be entrusted with the master's money and feared losing it. So he buried it. Sure enough, when the master came back, each received his reward. What's most interesting about this parable is that the master responded exactly how each slave expected he would. Those who considered him generous found him generous. The one who believed him to be a harsh man discovered that he was, indeed, harsh.

Both Paul and Jesus imply that what we do in the meantime influences what happens in the endtime. How we live now affects how we will experience God. If we see God as love, we will experience God's love. If we see God as a wrathful judge, we will experience God's wrath. C.S. Lewis, in his musings on Heaven and Hell in his book *The Great Divorce*, suggests that where one ends up will work backwards to color all that one has experienced. Those who end up in Heaven will see all of their earthly life, even the suffering, as a prelude to being in the presence of God. Conversely, the spite and selfishness of Hell will work backwards to color the whole memory of life on earth. The endtime and the meantime are closely intertwined.

I have to admit that I like the picture of Jesus more than the picture of Paul. I've seen too many people read Paul and then try to do God's work of deciding who will be saved and who will be

damned. There's enough "us and them" in the world already; we don't need more. Jesus brings the focus back to how each of us experiences God. Do we see God's love, God's grace, and God's willingness to forgive when we repent? Or do we see God's judgment and wrath, ready to punish us – or others?

The parable of Jesus tells it all. You have already been given the gifts. What will you do with them in the meantime before the master returns? Will you use them or hide them? What you do matters. Stay tuned for next week, when Jesus will show you how to use them.

[Pentecost 24: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30.]