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Usury and the Kingdom

Tom Cornell

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Today's Gospel parable can be confusing. But before we get to that, a married deacon can hardly let pass our first reading from Proverbs. It reads like a song, doesn't it? The valiant women, the worthy wife brings her family increase by her labors and reaches her hands out to the poor and brings the favor of God upon her house. Beauty is fleeting. Well, not always. Not this time. It will be forty-five years for us, Monica and me. Our son and daughter came to us a couple of weeks ago and said they want to throw us a Golden Wedding Anniversary party next July. "But," I said, "It's only our 45th!" My daughter answered, "But Pa, how do you now you're going to live another five years? And you might as well enjoy it now while you can." That's Catholic realism for you! We brought her up right. Family life is not for everyone. For us it's been about as good as it gets – at last.

Today's Gospel parable reminds me of the one in Luke's Gospel about the unjust steward. The unjust steward writes off the debt owed to his master. Remember, he calls in the debtors and asks each one how much do you owe, and then has them change their bill to much less. He steals from his master in order to feather his own nest and yet his master praises him. Jesus

was not suggesting in that parable that what the steward did was right and good. He makes it clear in the beginning that this is an unjust man, a man of darkness, like today's master who reaps where he has not sown. The unjust steward acts wisely according to the wisdom of the age, the wisdom of darkness, of the unredeemed world. So it is with today's parable. Jesus is not commending shrewd banking practices or investment tactics. In this parable too, Jesus holds up the guile and resourcefulness of the children of darkness to urge on the children of light. "We belong neither to darkness or to night; therefore let us not sleep like the rest, but stay awake and sober" against the day of judgment.

Let's take a closer look at this parable. Jesus was talking about enormous sums of money, between sixty-five and one hundred pounds of silver or gold to one talent! His hearers were ill at ease listening to this, we can assume. Such sums of money were beyond their experience or comprehension, mine too. They were uneasy too because the prophets of Israel had condemned usury, that is, taking interest on a loan, and so had the Psalmist. Money was for exchange, in their old fashioned view of things, not for making more money. Money stood for the value of goods that otherwise would have to be bartered. It's a medium of exchange, that's all. Money, or so they thought, is barren, sterile. It does not reproduce like a plant or an animal. Money does not make money and wealth. Work produces money and wealth. So the taking of money at interest was thought of as unnatural, perverse. Men are meant to live by the sweat of their brows, we learn in Genesis, the sweat of their own brows, not other peoples' brows. And that is the essence of capitalism, living off the sweat of other peoples' brows.

The Church is very suspicious and critical of capitalism. Many people are surprised to hear that. But it's true. Still, we live in the real world and even the Church has investments. But the Church warns us to keep a watchful eye, because abuse of unregulated capitalism is so very easy. Wealth tends

to percolate up to fewer and fewer hands, not filter down to more and more, and with wealth, power and influence, even over mass media, the power to misinform, to delude and manipulate. Power in fewer and fewer hands is a threat to democracy. Power serves its own purposes.

The Church always asks, of any economic or social program, “What does this do to the most vulnerable among us, the poor, the aged, the young? What does it do to the common good, the good of all of us?” Without some way of protecting the common good, things go wrong, desperately wrong, as we now must know. Unregulated lending for profit, usury, has led us into our present day economic crisis. How bad it’s going to get, and for how long, nobody knows. But we do know this: we are all going to feel it, sooner or later, and it’s going to be hard.

Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God. So the Church must proclaim the Kingdom of God, the City of God in the City of Man. That’s where we are, “in the world but not of it,” as we say. We strive for the Kingdom in our work. We pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” in the confidence that the arc of the universe bends toward justice. The Kingdom of God is a reign of peace and justice. So where is the justice, where the peace? This is the rabbis’ answer to our claim that Jesus is the awaited Messiah. “If he has come, where is the peace, where the justice? Look around. Nothing has changed. We’ll wait.”

Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is upon us, within us, in our midst, now. But as we can see, peace and justice do not reign on earth, not yet. The rabbis have a point. So we say of the Kingdom of God that it is here and not here, now but yet to come. Does that make any sense?

In Jesus it makes sense. Only in Jesus does it make sense. Jesus broke down the wall between Jew and gentile, between slave and free, between man and woman. More than that, Jesus broke down the wall between time and eternity, space and the “no-place” where God was before the Creation. “My peace

I give you, not as the world gives.” We recall these words, his words in a few minutes. “My peace.” Those who struggle for peace and justice must know that neither peace nor justice is our first goal, but Jesus, friendship with Jesus, a personal knowledge of Jesus, a communion with Jesus. And that is precisely why we gather here today and every Sunday, to draw closer to Jesus and closer to each other in Jesus. Then the Kingdom breaks through, little by little.

We can help build the Kingdom of God, but we can not complete it. Only God can do that. Jesus will come again, and he will continue and finish what began aeons ago when Wisdom, Logos, witnessed the Creation and danced with joy. Only Jesus can lead us in the dance. Come, Lord Jesus!