

The Most Common Idol on Earth

Wayne Waibel – 09/18/2022

You never change things really by fighting the existing reality. To change something, you need to build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete. It's far less disruptive and infinitely more effective than the prevailing tactic of shouting and marching and creating a general nuisance.

The powers behind such methods will tell you that the goal is to raise awareness to a perceived injustice or systemic failure, when the harsh reality is that all you generally accomplish is to obscure your goal and galvanize public sentiment against your cause.

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There is an awful lot of despair evident in both the call to worship and Jeremiah's lament this morning. The harshness and brutality while stark and disturbing are nonetheless a part of our Christian heritage.

Our understanding of God must continue to change and grow – not because Christianity will die if we don't, but because of Christianity's proven capacity to kill. The Crusades – The Inquisition – The Reformation – to site a few examples.

Man's inhumanity to man is neither new nor revolutionary. Christ's life as a ransom for that, however, is. His parable to the disciples today is referred to as the dishonest manager, and His words offer a real challenge to interpret. It's hard to read this passage from Luke and come away with any solid understanding.

On the one hand Jesus is telling His disciples to make friends for themselves by unrighteous mammon or wealth and on the other reminding them that they cannot serve God and mammon. This makes wealth the single most common idol on earth.

The parable of the dishonest manager is placed by Luke between the Prodigal Son and the Rich Man and Lazarus. There seems to be a progression of sorts here when it comes to the severity of the point being made, but this particular parable stands alone in its certainty to confound if not outright defy interpretation.

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Nearly twenty years ago I was the president of AFSCME Local 693 representing the library rank and file. The lion's share of my activity in that position was spent running interference between my co-workers and the Union. I managed to successfully negotiate three labor agreements during my tenure, but that was in spite of the Union – not because of it.

The old guard at the state level readily and almost exclusively engaged in a relentless campaign of irritation and heated rhetoric in the belief that their preferred tactics, which for my money amounted to little more than tantrums were effective methods to further the union cause, which, ironically was labeled dignity and respect.

Their entire strategy was to wear down the county authority with endless use of inflamed speech until the county – growing weary of the clamor would acquiesce to an acceptable degree. No real gains were ever made, but the union continued to rake in our monthly dues, a full eighty percent of which went directly to the national political machine supporting candidates we had nothing whatever in common with.

That experience – which concluded after six long and exhausting years taught me a very valuable lesson that I still cling to. Old hierarchies need to be overturned – not destroyed – overturned. We’re not talking about revolution necessarily, but most certainly a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.

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So what is the Master telling us? “For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.” Put another way – we could learn a thing or two from the rogue steward. Even though his ways are unjust – still there is salvation in the form of gaining favor from his masters’ debtors by reducing their debt.

Odds are the steward was inflating the original debt to exact a little profit for himself at the outset and now that he was losing his position – why not cut the delinquent borrower a little slack – the master gets his repayment, and the steward builds good will with someone who may be in a position to help him down the road. And these are lessons the disciples are going to need to learn.

Additionally – the hard lesson in all of this is that you cannot serve two masters. You can serve God OR you can serve wealth – either or – you cannot do both. This is a lesson that presents itself at some point in everyone’s journey. In fact – it probably occurs on numerous occasions, and you have to choose God every time. If you do not – somewhere along the line – the choice will no longer be offered.

The good news is that he who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much. To God – magnitude can be irrelevant. If you are faithful in tending to your flocks and seeing to their welfare – you may one day be entrusted to be a king of nations – like a young shepherd named David for instance.

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Even though today’s gospel fails to present in completely understandable terms, it is solid in its expression of truth. We are charged to be faithful.

Beyond that – we are to look outside the box – our comfort zones – the business-as-usual model – and allow for the influence of less than righteous motivations, trusting that our inner still small voice will guide us to the kernel of truth that commands our attention.

Because we are a loving people. We support and uplift one another. We emulate the life of love embodied in our leader and savior, Jesus Christ. The welfare of others will always supersede our personal welfare. We take care of each other. Knowing full well that God, through His Son – has taken care of us.

It's so nice to be afforded the care personified in this community of faith, and that care will most certainly be extended to all who enter here.

For here is where the rubber meets the road.

Here resides a natural indifference to matters of the world.

Here is where there is complete understanding of what Jesus continually imparts to His disciples: letting go is to have - and keeping is the way to lose. And that is how you are able to go about overturning old hierarchies, and overcoming the most common idol on earth. Amen.