

SERMON FOR NOVEMBER 13, 2011, 22ND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Rev. Margaret Sagar at United Memorial, Halifax
Psalm 90; 1Thessaloninas 5.1-11; Matthew 25 14-30;
What do you expect? What do you believe?

- I wonder what you think of the “Occupy Wall Street Movement” and its offshoots into our own city and around the world.
- I wonder what you think about the events with Occupy Halifax over the past few days-if you have given them any deep thought. Perhaps you think it’s about time the tents were removed and they gave up this crazy protest that doesn’t have a clear focus.
- You might have been surprised to learn that the group occupied St. Andrew’s United Church for an evening and some for a night – at the invitation of the minister (Rev Russ Daye) and under the initiative of Rev. Linda Yates-she was asked by the group on Friday afternoon if there was anywhere they could go for shelter, to dry out, warm up and recoup; to figure out what next.
- You might be wondering what the dickens the church has got involved in all this for? These two need their brains tested. Or maybe you are pleased and proud that the UCC stands up for something... maybe you’re not sure what. How does all this connect with the gospel mandate? What do you believe? What do you expect? What’s it all about anyway this Occupy stuff?
- Let’s think about it!

Scripture

- The story we heard just now from Matthew’s gospel is a real teaser! It has puzzled all the commentators! I’ve struggled with it this week! There are at least 2 diametrically opposed interpretations. I’m going to opt a new take on it for me and I suspect for you too! I’m taking it as a story rather than a parable to be understood metaphorically.
- Listen as I put this story into a contemporary style!

Once there was this guy who had a ton of money. (One of the 1%. as the Occupy movement puts it) Of course Jesus didn’t say a “ton,” he said a “talent,” which was a measure of weight– a lot of it. A talent of money would be the equivalent of fifteen years of a peasant’s wages.) So for now this millionaire has got about \$120 million to play with. (You don’t suppose he earned that by his own honest, hard labor do you? Working overtime, maybe? Or was it more likely by using other people, gaming the system, paying the lowest possible wages, oppressing workers, skimping on safety and environmental measures, lobbying for fewer regulations, taking advantage where his money and power allowed him to? ...)

He lines up his money managers. To one he assigns \$75 million, to another \$30 million, and to another \$15 million. The first two play the game. They invest his money (In struggling family farms? Probably not. More likely where the real money is: armaments, oil, speculative banking, currency trading, drug dealing, shady deals, loan sharking ...) These two were successful! - they doubled their money.

But the third manager won't play along. He struggled with what was going on. He knew usury was a sin! He followed the custom of the people around him and sought to protect the money which he had been given. He buried it in the ground to keep it safe, to keep it hidden. (He joins the Occupy Galilee protest!)

On the return of the wealthy man the first two fronted up with the extra money they had gained for the wealthy man "Excellent work!" the wealthy man says! "You can have my business contracts! I'll deal with you! And now you can share in my happiness and wealth!"

But the third manager exposed the wealthy man saying, "Do you know how afraid people are of you? You steal money that's not yours. You rake in money you didn't earn. You cut the needy out of your budgets. Well, I'm not going to participate in your economic game. I'm not going to work for you. So I buried your money in a shallow grave, a place of death. Here take your money back. Go get an honest job and make your own money."

Now, the wealthy man was furious! He blew his stack! "How dare you do this to me!! How dare you speak like that to me! If you had put the money in the bank at least I'd have it back with interest!" Of course, having had his little rant, the rich guy fires him; chucks him out to live in poverty on the street. He cut him off from his community and world because he was of no use to him!

The rich get richer, don't they?— and the poor get poorer. The one who has everything gets more, and from the one who has nothing, even what he has is taken away.

The End!

Read this way Jesus story is a critique of the systems of this world, a critique of those who benefit from the labour of others, and expect to get richer all the time! It is a critique of people like King Herod and other wealthy landholders of Jesus day, a critique of the Roman system of Empire. Moreover, it could be read as a critique of the 1% in our own age and their desire for increased wealth and prosperity, often reliant on the work of others on their behalf, on playing the system for all its worth regardless of the well-being of others. It reverses the prosperity theology that has often been associated with this passage and rings more truthfully of Jesus words to the rich young ruler "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven" and all that Jesus stood for.

Next Sunday as you celebrate the reign of Christ, you will likely hear the next story Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel- introduced by the word "BUT when the Son of man comes" (Christ) ... -it tells how blessed are those who care for the marginalized and needy.....who exercise compassion and kindness, justice and right relations! These are the ones, cast out by the Pharisees, Herods and Empire of this world that God has an express concern for. It is a concern expressed in Jesus own willingness not only to be associated with them in his life but ultimately to be cast out with them – to hang on a cross, a place understood by the Jews to be place for those cursed by God and humanity.

(story and commentary based on Steve Garnaas- Holmes and Peter Lockhart of Kairos Uniting Church of Australia. Links on Text this Week)

As church, as Christ's followers- that's what we are to do, isn't it? - to identify with those outcasts with whom Jesus identified; our place is to challenge the systems of this world which enable a few to grow wealthy off the labour of others; our place is to welcome into the presence of Jesus and his coming reign those who feel ostracized, abused and desolate in this world in which we live.

What kind of a God do we believe in? in a God who rewards those who already have much or who seeks his own gain through using others to advance his cause? Do we believe in a God who judges us on what we do and casts us aside if we don't measure up?

Or do we believe in a God who asks serious questions of systems and institutions and individuals who exploit others for personal gain? Do we believe in a God who identifies himself with the ordinary folk and especially the marginalized and vulnerable of this world and shares in their lot? Do we believe in a God who seeks a way of revelation through which we meet him in serving those who suffer in the world? In other words do we believe in a God of unconditional grace and unending love?

- Not so easy is it? And you know while it is indeed true that 1% of the people in our nation as well as in USA, and globally own the majority of the wealth and the power and influence that go with it,-majority of us here do indeed belong to the 99% of Canadians - and that can be broken down into smaller groups- yet, we in the developed world are almost all part of the 1% on a global scale.
- And yes, like some of you, I am retired and living on my investments- I want them to make the most possible while at the same time I do not want them to be in some sectors of the world's business like Canadian mining companies that are guilty of abuse of human rights and evading all environmental responsibility, or in arms building and military procurements! I wish that the ships to be built here in Halifax were not war ships – some of them. Though I am glad for the work.... Life is very complicated!
- And what about the Occupy movement – well they are protesting the injustices that we all ought to be protesting! Glaring problems in this world. Things I have preached about the need to remedy and speak out about throughout my ministry! If we really seek the reign of God we need to think seriously about their protests and raise our voices in protest.
- Read from their statement on their web site what they are protesting (<http://occupypns.org>) :
- What's **not** of Christ in all this? How can you and I throw our energy and efforts into transforming the world- we may not see much point in be willing to camp out in public parks, but how do we pray Thy Kingdom come without joining the protest in some way?.... can we ignore all this injustice? How do we seek the transformation not only of our own hearts and wills as individuals but also as a community of faith, as a society?
- More questions than answers today! We struggle- and God is with us in the struggle to live the best lives of faith we can! God is here to support us in our rallying for justice, to

open our ears to the prophetic voices of our day no matter whose voices they are! Like Jesus we must challenge the unjust systems of our day despite the fact that our lives are so intricately bound with them! We do not need to fear God—we trust her love and compassion and we put our hope in her wisdom and guidance.

- To the Holy Mystery at the Heart of the Universe, Source of Life and Love, to her be all honour and glory, all love and all praise! Amen