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The Gospel According to Luke
LXII. When He Returned, Having Received the Kingdom
Luke 19:11-27

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Two versions of this parable appear in the Gospels – one in Matthew[1] and here in Luke. We are more familiar with Matthew's version, in which three servants are given different sums of money – one ten pounds, one five, and the last one. In Luke's version, there are ten servants and each one receives the same amount. This is our first clue to the fact that while these two versions of this parable are very similar, the differences between them turn out to be critical. In fact, these differences alter the point made by the parable. Matthew's version convicts us with regard to our stewardship of the resources God has given to us. Luke's version, as we will see, convicts us with regard to something even more fundamental. Luke's version speaks of what it means to live as Christians while we await the return of our King and the coming of His Kingdom.

The very first sentence of our Scripture sets us up for this interpretation. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem – in fact, next week we will be reading the Palm Sunday story. The disciples are excited about this trip to Jerusalem because they believe Jesus is entering Jerusalem to kick out the Romans and to restore the throne of David. Jesus has three times warned them concerning what is really going to happen in Jerusalem – but clearly the warnings have fallen on deaf ears. And so the parable begins: *"He proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately."* In other words, one last time, before they enter the Holy City, Jesus tries to set His disciples straight about what is to happen and what it will mean for them.

And then Jesus begins the parable proper: *"A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return."* Now, right there is something everyone listening would have immediately understood, something "ripped from the headlines," so to speak. You see, this idea of a nobleman going to a far country to receive a kingdom was not a fiction, but an event which had actually happened in the living memory of those around Jesus. After the death of the evil King Herod, Herod's son, Archelaus, had made a journey to Rome to request that he be given his father's title and rule – which was not fully granted, mainly on account of an opposition group of Jews from Judea who travelled to Rome to express to Caesar their hatred of Archelaus. Everybody Jesus was addressing that day knew that story. And so they also fully understood from Archelaus' story that note of opposition to the nobleman's quest which is presented a few verses farther into Jesus' parable: *"A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return . . . But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'"*

So already we have learned some important things from Jesus' parable: the disciples expect the kingdom to come and for Jesus to be crowned as king as soon as He enters Jerusalem. Jesus is telling them that instead, like the nobleman, He must first go on a journey to a far country to receive His kingdom – referring to the coming events of the crucifixion, resurrection, and the ascension into heaven. And then, only after having received His kingship at the right hand of the Father, will Jesus return to establish His kingdom on earth. The kingdom is not coming immediately, He is telling His disciples – but will come only after His journey to the far country of heaven and back is completed. And second, in the meantime between His setting out and His return in glory, Jesus' rule will be met by opposition from within the world – just as Archelaus' rule had met opposition. There will be many who will not want Jesus as their King, and who will actively oppose Him and His rule on earth.

All of which now sets the stage for the heart of the parable: the instructions that the nobleman gives to his servants regarding what they are to do during his absence – how they are to conduct themselves while they await for his return and the beginning of his rule: *"Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business <u>until</u> I come.'"* Now this is one of those places in the Bible where the English translation does not do full justice to the original Greek text. *"Engage in business until I come"*: the English translation makes it sound a lot like Matthew's version of the parable – where the servants are instructed to multiply the Master's money. But Luke's version is different in a critical way. What Luke's version actually says in the Greek is not so much *"Engage in business <u>until</u> I return,"* but rather *"Engage in business <u>because</u> I will return."*[2]

The shift in meaning is profound. The challenge being put to the servants is not to make more money for their master, rather it is something far more difficult and dangerous. Remember the enemies of the nobleman, those who will actively oppose his kingship? What the nobleman is asking of his servants is that they publicly prove their loyalty to him while he is away – that they prove their loyalty to him even in the face of all the opposition to the nobleman and to his cause. What the nobleman is actually asking the servants to do is to invest their lives in the seemingly uncertain proposition that the nobleman, given all the opposition to him, really will be coming back as king. *"Engage in business because I return"* actually means *"Are you willing to take the risk of openly declaring yourself to be my servant – during my absence and in a world where many will oppose me and anyone connected to me?"*

This parable assumes that the servants know all about the opposition to the nobleman. And given the political turmoil of the ancient middle East – a sad fact which we see still being played out in our own time – everyone hearing this parable would know exactly what those servants ought to do if they were to be prudent and wise. Instead of setting up shop in the name of their absent master, if they possess even the slightest sense of self-preservation, then they should bury that money under the floorboards until they see whether it is the nobleman or his enemies which prevail. They should play it safe and not take sides, until after the issue is decided. Imagine, for example, if the Shah of Iran, just before he was deposed by the Iranian Revolution, had gathered together ten of his most faithful servants and said to them, *"I'm going to be going away for a little while, but I will be back to reclaim my throne. Here is $50,000 each. I want you to open shops in downtown Teheran in my name! The sign on the shop shall read, 'His Majesty, the Shah's, Royal Rug Shop,' or whatever sort of shop it might be. That way you will proclaim your loyalty to me*

publicly while I am gone and until I come back. And I will come back. My enemies will try to destroy me, but I will prevail and come back – and so you must publicly live your lives in anticipation of my return, no matter what hostility you might face from the Ayatollah and those who support him." What do you think those servants would then do with that money the moment the Shah left the city and the Ayatollah and his Revolutionary Guards took over?[3]

Well, that is the situation of the ten servants in Jesus' parable. Because of his enemies, the nobleman's return as king may very well seem to these servants to be a very uncertain thing. And because of the possibility that the enemies might defeat the nobleman, for his servants publicly to proclaim themselves as loyal supporters of this nobleman is a most risky business. If the enemies defeat the nobleman, what might they then do to those who have publicly backed the nobleman? When Archelaus returned, he certainly was not very gentle with those who had opposed him. *"Engage in business because I will return"* is not a test of stewardship, but rather a test of those ten servants' fidelity to and belief in their master, and in his coming kingdom.

And that, of course, is the test the parable places upon us. We live in that period when the nobleman has already left and gone away to a far country to receive His kingdom. Our Lord and Master has ascended into heaven and is bodily absent from this earth. And while He has promised us He is coming again to reign over heaven and earth, the actual evidence on earth that this will be the case is uncertain at best. For the rule of our Lord and Savior is everywhere met with opposition. Everywhere we look we can readily find evidence suggesting that Jesus is not in control – war and famine and tribulation and trouble and disease and disorder and moral depravity and death. So what would a prudent person do in such a situation as this? Would it not be wise to take our faith in Jesus underground – keep it both personal and private only – and so avoid being overtly labelled as "one of those Christians"? Would it not be better to live a dual life – a Christian in private and a person just like everyone else in public? Wouldn't it be safer to ignore the thorn in our flesh difficult demands of Jesus and chose instead the path of moral and spiritual compromise? *"Engage in business because I will return"* – but wouldn't it be easier just to go along with the world around us, and not call too much attention to our faith? Wouldn't it better to play both sides of the fence until the day when we are sure that Jesus really is coming back?

I still remember a story that one of our youth told years ago on Youth Sunday – the story Alex Houck told about summer running camp, when he and his buddies spent the day occasionally running and eating, but mostly trying to meet girls. And how, on the last day of camp, the girl he had conversed with most often and most deeply came up to him to ask him whether or not he was a Christian. And how that incident caused him to wonder what was missing in the way he was living and presenting himself to others that she would have to ask that question. I'm still grateful to Alex for telling that story – because that story is essentially what this parable is asking of us: Are we truly followers of Jesus or not? What public evidence are we presenting of our loyalty to Jesus Christ? Are we truly engaging ourselves in the Master's business until and because of His eventual return? Are we living our lives for Jesus, showing ourselves publicly as those who deeply and passionately belong to Him, ordering our lives in accordance with His Word instead of in accordance with whatever worldly fad is in fashion at the moment? Does the sign over our homes and our work and our leisure and our church commitment boldly and publicly proclaim: *"I belong to Jesus, and I am living in this way because I know that He is the King and that His Kingdom is coming"*?

For an accounting of our lives and of how we have spent them will indeed await us all, says this parable: *"When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business."* Again, the emphasis here in Luke is not on how much profit they made, but rather the more fundamental question of whether or not they have proved themselves loyal during his absence. The reckoning here is not, *"Show me the money,"* but rather, *"Show me the business you have transacted in my name. Show me how faithfully have you done what I have asked you to do."* And note also the reward for loyalty is not more money, but a higher responsibility within the kingdom of the king: *"Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities."*

But what of the servant who fails the test? The key verse is the one where the servant says to the nobleman, *"I was afraid of you, because you are a severe man."* Nothing in this story gives us any reason to think this of the nobleman. The first two servants certainly didn't perceive the nobleman that way. And the nobleman, so far, has been nothing but generous and trusting with his servants. Which explains why the nobleman says to the third servant: *"I will condemn you with your own words."* In other words, the failing of the third servant wasn't just that he didn't work publicly for his master, but that he failed to grasp the heart of his master. He failed to risk himself on behalf of a master who is, in fact, quite generous and kind. The failing of the third servant is that he was afraid to show publicly his loyalty to his master by the way he lived during the master's absence.

You know, here in America, we're not accustomed to thinking of our faith as a risk, as risky business – other Christians in other parts of the world certainly are, however. But we tend to think of our faith more in terms of reassurance, comfort, and stability in a shifting world. But while all those things are indeed part of our experience of life with Jesus, what Jesus nonetheless also requires of us is something which is more in the neighborhood of our being discomforted, of our living differently enough that we risk being labelled as odd, even placing ourselves and what we believe constitutes our security and happiness at risk for His sake. You know, bearing the cross – just like He told us to. Jesus wants us to live now as if He really will be coming back one day. He wants us to live now as if the real world is not this one, but the one which is coming. He wants us to live a Kingdom life now, even when the Kingdom is not yet fully here – to stand up publicly for Him by how we live each day.

Which reminds me of one of my favorite Leo Tolstoy stories. He imagines a man sitting in a rowboat that has been pushed off from the shore. He has been shown the opposite shore and equipped with a pair of oars to row himself across the river. And so straight out into the stream he goes – only to find that the current is strong and is pulling him away from his course. Other boats are there in the middle of the river: some still struggling against the current, but most have tossed away their oars and are gliding contentedly along with the current. The man calls out to a group that is drifting with the current, *"Is this the way?"* And a chorus of voices calls back, *"Of course it is! What did you think? There can be no other way."* And so he raises his oars and joins them in drifting along. But after a while he becomes more and more aware of a distant and frightening sound – the roar of a waterfall. And the man in an instant comes to himself, remembers what he has forgotten – his journey to the other shore – and furiously begins to row upstream, crying out:

"Fool that I was to drift!"[4] Jesus wants us to live against the current, to live not in accord with the way things are, but in accord for how they will be when He comes again. No matter what it might cost us in the time in-between.

"Engage in business because I will return." How we live right now, how publicly we stand for Christ and His Kingdom, how faithfully we seek to live by His Word, how passionately we seek to show forth His glory and His grace to others – this is the test Jesus here lays upon us. But there is a flipside to this test. This parable also suggests that what we do each day can truly be of service to our Master and to His Kingdom. That even the smallest of our daily actions can now be seen as suffused with the possibility of bearing witness to our King. I ran across this passage from Frederick Buechner years ago – and it is still one of my favorites:

> *A face comes toward us down the street. Do we raise our eyes or do we keep them lowered, passing by in silence? Somebody says something about somebody else, and what he says happens to be not only cruel but also funny, and everybody laughs. Do we laugh too, or do we speak the truth? When a friend has hurt us, do we take pleasure in hating him, because hate has its pleasures as well as love, or do we try to build back some flimsy little bridge? . . .*
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> *All the absurd little meetings, decisions, inner skirmishes that go to make up our days. It all adds up to very little, and yet it all adds up to very much. Our days are full of nonsense, and yet not, because it is precisely into the nonsense of our days that God speaks to us words of great significance . . . And the words that he says, to each of us differently, are "Be brave . . . be merciful . . . feed my lambs . . . press on toward the goal."*[5]

"A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return." And he gathered his servants, entrusted them with his gifts, and said to them: *"Engage in business, in acts of public loyalty to me – because I will be coming back as King."*

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[1] Matthew 25:14-30.

[2] See Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 397-409 for a very helpful exploration of this parable. I have made liberal use of Bailey's insights throughout this sermon.

[3] Bailey, p. 400.

[4] As told in James S. Stewart, The Gates of New Life (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), pp. 115-116.

[5] Frederick Buechner, "Message in the Stars," in Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 20.