



September 24, 2017 - Stand firm in one Spirit Given by Pastor Mattei

21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. 27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...(Phil 1)

“Praying instead of working? Whom are you kidding?” Our resentment was aimed not at the landlord but at the worker who so justified his setting himself literally apart while the rest of us sweat away. This is the closest I can come to my personal association to today’s gospel. We youngsters hired ourselves out for daily work in a vineyard during a mission trip and the earned money was later sent to build a well in Uganda.

While the gospel story along with the Jonah’s story highlight our difficulty in comprehending God’s generosity, it is Paul’s letter to the Philippians that nails the reason why we do what we do. The scope is to “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel...And this is God's doing. (Phil 1:27-28)

Let me repeat what Paul recommends: Conducting a life “worthy of the gospel - standing firm in one spirit - striving side by side with one mind.” This may be a daunting task considering how difficult it is to be vigilant and follow the Lord without giving in to the temptations and lures of the world.

Jesus’ parable found only in Matthew addresses conflicts within Matthew’s community: As with other parables found solely in Matthew's Gospel, the conflict centers around judgment—who belongs and who doesn't—and, most of all, who has the authority to judge. In our everyday life we do this all the time: we decide who is acceptable and who is not; who is a greater sinner and who is a respectable person. We keep that measuring stick all too ready. Somehow to feel good, worthy and lovable we need to put other people down and tell God: “See? There are worse people than I.”

Jesus did away with the measuring stick! "The last will be first, and the first will be last" upset our expectations of who God is and how God should work. We are reminded that God's mercy and generosity are wholly gratuitous. Would we be so quick to cry "Justice be done" if we were the last workers to be chosen for the fields? When we are the beneficiaries of God's mercy, we are glad that God doesn't play fair. God plays mercifully.

Finding our center in him trains us to see that all is a generous gift of God, all is grace. In prayer and meditation we realize that, when Christ takes over, our consciousness is expanded to the point of affirming that we are truly who we are (we find our Center and our Being) when we are one in God. This enlightened identity unmask the lie that we are separated from one another and we learn to embrace all people as our brothers and sisters. It is then that we learn to take responsibility for the evil we do and are capable of inflicting on others and do not resort to scapegoating, blaming others for the evil in the world. Only people who recognize their own evil, or at least their complicity in evil, stop this unconscious scapegoating pattern. Their experience of radical union with God makes it possible for them to own their own shadow, their own capacity for evil, and not need to hate it in other people. Union with God in the Spirit, being of the same mind...if we are able to experience that we will realize the humanity of all not for the dangerous purpose of excusing evil but for the noble purpose of working with others without judgment. Fully conscious people do not judge or point fingers; unconscious people do almost nothing else.

The social, economic, and political implications of this practice are astounding: if we are one in God, then we are not in competition with one another but support the growth and development of all. If we are sons and daughters of a loving Creator, then every human being is our sister and brother, and we can never hurt anyone on earth ever again, much less be silent in the face of war, starvation, racism, sexism, nuclear weapons, systemic injustice, and environmental destruction.

Looking inside reveals to us our connection to systemic evil. Evil is not just personal but involves the collective. The Ten Commandments were not given for the purpose of paving a personal path to heaven but were intended for the preservation and the development of the community. There is a deep and direct connection between "the world" or "the system" with its culture and corporations and the evil things private individuals do. The entertainment and business worlds celebrate people who are greedy, ambitious, angry, vain, prideful, deceptive in the name of profit, and "lustful" in many ways beyond the obvious. When we buy into that system we become part of the system. We justify, normalize, reward and promote evil at this systemic level even as at same time we try to shame it at the personal level. It does not and cannot work. The struggle is

to learn to be in the world but not of the world, “standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel,” resisting the idolatry of a system of competition and judgment, living separate from one another. May we rediscover the beauty of being one with God and one another.