

Adventures in Missing The Point
I Want Justice . . . NOW!
October 5, 2008
Steven M Conger

Matthew 21:33-46 (The Message)

"Here's another story. Listen closely. There was once a man, a wealthy farmer, who planted a vineyard. He fenced it, dug a winepress, put up a watchtower, then turned it over to the farmhands and went off on a trip. When it was time to harvest the grapes, he sent his servants back to collect his profits.

"The farmhands grabbed the first servant and beat him up. The next one they murdered. They threw stones at the third but he got away. The owner tried again, sending more servants. They got the same treatment. The owner was at the end of his rope. He decided to send his son. 'Surely,' he thought, 'they will respect my son.'

"But when the farmhands saw the son arrive, they rubbed their hands in greed. 'This is the heir! Let's kill him and have it all for ourselves.' They grabbed him, threw him out, and killed him.

"Now, when the owner of the vineyard arrives home from his trip, what do you think he will do to the farmhands?"

"He'll kill them—a rotten bunch, and good riddance," they answered. "Then he'll assign the vineyard to farmhands who will hand over the profits when it's time."

Jesus said, "Right—and you can read it for yourselves in your Bibles:

The stone the masons threw out
is now the cornerstone.

This is God's work;
we rub our eyes, we can hardly believe it!

"This is the way it is with you. God's kingdom will be taken back from you and handed over to a people who will live out a kingdom life. Whoever stumbles on this Stone gets shattered; whoever the Stone falls on gets smashed."

When the religious leaders heard this story, they knew it was aimed at them. They wanted to arrest Jesus and put him in jail, but, intimidated by public opinion, they held back. Most people held him to be a prophet of God.

August 29, 2005, a category 5 hurricane slams into the gulf states devastating New Orleans and the surrounding area.

Two weeks after the levees failed, President Bush stood in Jackson Square in New Orleans and promised “to rebuild the city and the region.” At the time he said: “We will do what it takes, we will stay as long as it takes, to help citizens rebuild their communities and their lives.”

Recently, on the third anniversary of Katrina, President Bush visited New Orleans, noting the “incredible progress that’s being made.” He praised the funds given to the region, saying that “three years after the storm, we’ve helped deliver \$126 billion of U.S. taxpayer money.”

And yet, despite the promises, despite the money from the government and faith based organizations still much needs to be done.

Raymond Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America said on the third anniversary of Katrina:

“If the history of the Katrina recovery were written today, it would be a tragedy. Far too little progress has been made despite the remarkable effort and ingenuity of the people of the region who are fighting to restore their homes and their lives . . . Much of the progress has come at the hands of Gulf Coast residents - in spite of significant hurdles placed in front of them by the federal government.”

Bill Quigley a human rights lawyer and law professor at Loyola University New Orleans reports in Gulf Coast Reconstruction Watch, a project of the Institute of Southern Studies reports that:

- Of the 963 public housing apartments in St. Bernard Parish that were destroyed — 0 have been rebuilt.
- of the estimated 10,000 rental homes that were supposed to be repaired and occupied by the 3rd anniversary only 82 have been finished.
- only 11 percent of the residents of the lower 9th ward have moved back home
- at the current pace, it is estimated to take 20-25 more years to finish the rebuilding of New Orleans
- 6,982 families are still living in FEMA trailers in the metro New Orleans area

- ½ the population of New Orleans has not returned

Earlier this week I went over to meet with some pastors in Gary — I was shocked to find that their was still water that had yet to be pumped back into the Little Cal.

Granted, it had only been two weeks, but imagine if that was your neighborhood? I stood in the town hall on Wednesday after the flood and heard people screaming — “why isn’t the water gone yet!” Yet in Gary it was still standing!! Does anybody care?

I also walked through some of the devastated area in Munster — and a lot has changed in these last three weeks — but still . . .

We are supposed to be in the second week of a stewardship series, But I just don’t think that is appropriate right now. Normally, we do a three or four week series on being good stewards, send out a few letters, and invite you to make a faith commitment to the church. We are not going to do that this year.

Instead, we are going to invite you to make a faith commitment on Sunday, October 26th and basically skip the campaign. I know that this makes the finance committee very nervous — but I think we have more timely issues to focus on right now.

What keeps going through my mind is that as long as we keep social problems off of our radar scope — as long as we keep hunger and poverty out of our vision — then maybe — just maybe it doesn’t really exist.

I had the opportunity — privilege — to preside over Carrie Cable and Eric Messmer’s wedding yesterday (it was a beautiful wedding) — but what was interesting was that Carrie’s sister came up to me and asked me about what was happening at the State Street Center — she had been in town the weekend we talked about it closing (she’s from Louisville) and she was genuinely concerned about what was going on.

For many of us — that is old history — we have forgotten about the children of God — our brothers and sisters who were being ministered there. If we forget about them — maybe they are not hungry anymore!

A couple of years ago — I preached on Darfur — an area of the world where genocide is taking place — but now it is off most of our radar scopes. Have

the murders stopped? NO — we just aren't talking about it!

Is life back to "normal" in New Orleans, three years later?

Can you feel the tension that comes with being a Christian?

We want to change the world — we want to end hunger, oppression, poor education, unsafe housing in the world

BUT and this is a **BIG BUT**

We don't want those changes to inconvenience us

We are glad to feed people in Hammond, as long as they stay in Hammond.

There is this tension

We want the kingdom of God — but we want it on our terms.

BUT THAT IS NOT THE KINGDOM

The Kingdom of God is described in Isaiah 65:17-25 (The Message)

"Pay close attention now:
 I'm creating new heavens and a new earth.
 All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain
 are things of the past, to be forgotten.
 Look ahead with joy.
 Anticipate what I'm creating:
 I'll create Jerusalem as sheer joy,
 create my people as pure delight.
 I'll take joy in Jerusalem,
 take delight in my people:
 No more sounds of weeping in the city,
 no cries of anguish;
 No more babies dying in the cradle,
 or old people who don't enjoy a full lifetime;
 One-hundredth birthdays will be considered normal—
 anything less will seem like a cheat.
 They'll build houses
 and move in.
 They'll plant fields
 and eat what they grow.
 No more building a house

that some outsider takes over,
 No more planting fields
 that some enemy confiscates,
 For my people will be as long-lived as trees,
 my chosen ones will have satisfaction in their work.
 They won't work and have nothing come of it,
 they won't have children snatched out from under them.
 For they themselves are plantings blessed by God,
 with their children and grandchildren likewise God-blessed.
 Before they call out, I'll answer.
 Before they've finished speaking, I'll have heard.
 Wolf and lamb will graze the same meadow,
 lion and ox eat straw from the same trough,
 but snakes—they'll get a diet of dirt!
 Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
 anywhere on my Holy Mountain," says God.

- suffering will be abolished
- end to infant mortality that is too prevalent
- elderly will live out their lives in good health
- people will have decent housing
- everyone will have a job that pays a fair wage
- mothers will not worry that their children will be destroyed by drugs or blown away by gang warfare
- the ecological balance of Eden will be restored

I don't know about you — BUT I WANT THAT

Is it utopian — absolutely

The question is - how badly do I want it?
 How much am I willing to work for it?

That is the Kingdom — when God's justice reigns!

We have tried throughout our history to create these utopian communities
 Oneida colony
 New Harmony Indiana
 Nova Hutta in Poland following WW II

We live in that tension

We all know that we cannot become fully like Christ until he returns — BUT we must strive toward the goal of the kingdom.

We may not be able to create the kingdom of God in it's fullness — yet as Christians we are called to work toward that end DAILY!

In 1982, British rocker and lead singer of the group Bono, got involved in the Live Aid and the Band Aid concerts ---- the money raised was used to help Ethiopians who were suffering through famine.

But Bono was not content to just raise money. He and his wife went to Ethiopia and for six weeks they worked in an orphanage.

“You wake up in the morning and the mist would be lifting. You'd walk out of your tent and you would count dead bodies of dead or abandoned children. Or worse, the father of a child would walk up to you and try to give you his living child and say, ‘You take it, because if this is your child, it won't die.’”

I don't know about you, but I am tired of playing church. Pretending that it is all about me, and thinking that because I live where I live, and have what I have, that it means that God loves me more.

I am tired of shuffling the chairs around the deck of the titanic while it is sinking.

What all of those utopian communities wanted to do is exactly what the Church of Jesus Christ is supposed to be doing

Let's do something

Let's become kingdom people

Let's put our lives where we say our hearts are.