

November 17, 2013 – 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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[Malachi 3:19-20a](#); [Psalms 98:5-6, 7-8, 9](#); [2 Thessalonians 3:7-12](#); [Luke 21:5-19](#)

I have heard people use parts of Scripture like today's Gospel to describe a terrible End Times doctrine which portrays a future of great suffering and destruction of Earth. Some have even used these ideas to explain and support wars in the Middle East, saying that if these wars help to bring Jesus back more quickly (by fulfilling the End Time prophecies), they may actually be good. This is a dangerous misreading of the Bible. Today's readings show that we should not be passively waiting for the end of Earth, but be actively working to help bring about God's kingdom ... "on earth as it is in heaven." (Matthew 6:10)

In each of the synoptic Gospels, Jesus is portrayed as predicting that this destruction will happen soon. "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." (Luke 21:32) Clearly, almost 2,000 years later, we have to acknowledge that this statement cannot be interpreted literally. Yet throughout those two millennia, groups of Christians have withdrawn from society in expectation of the immediate coming of Jesus. Over 10 years ago at the turn of the millennium, numerous groups thought the end was coming, and again in 2012, some thought the same thing due to the end of a long cycle in the Mayan calendar.

Paul's letter today responds directly to this concept of waiting for an imminent end. In the letter, Paul responds to a specific problem confronting the Thessalonian community at that time: A number of followers had stopped working in anticipation of what they thought was the rapidly approaching end of time and second coming of Jesus. The letter was written around 70 AD, about one generation after Jesus' prediction, so many had given up working to simply wait for the second coming. The growing number of idle people in the community was starting to lead to gossip, rumors and infighting within the community.

When Paul wrote, "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat," it was not a general exhortation to all who are unemployed to be considered unworthy. He was specifically referring to those who had stopped working to wait for Jesus. Especially at a time like today, when levels of unemployment are so high around the world, Paul would have compassion for those who want to work but are unable to find employment. His words should not be used to imply a lack of compassion for unemployed workers.

So what are we to do while waiting for the second coming? Paul urges us to "work quietly and to earn [our] own living," while Jesus points out that our "endurance ... will gain [our] souls." They are telling us to continue in our work to help bring about God's kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven." It could be, as some argue, that God's will is to reign down fire and brimstone to destroy the beautiful planet God created with such care, but that idea doesn't ring true to me. I am more of the opinion that God's will is more like Isaiah's New Earth, as described in Isaiah 65: 17-21:

"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind ... [N]o more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it ... No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat."

Our goals are also clearly spelled out in Matthew's description of final judgment: Those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, invite the stranger, and visit those who are sick or in prison will be chosen. (Matthew 25:34-36) By doing these things and serving those facing the greatest difficulties, we create a loving community, a New Earth, where all people are able to have dignified work to support their own sustenance, where no one is excluded. This is the important work that Jesus has called us to, not to wait idly for Jesus to return.

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