

Meditation: “The Earth is the Lord’s”

Text: Matthew 25:31-40

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At 8 p.m. on Monday, January 22, 1973, participants gathered for worship in this building to dedicate this chapel at the Houston International Seamen’s Center.

It was a long time coming.

A decade earlier a Belgian sea captain started to dream of a seafarers centre – he found a few partners for the work and proposed a modest structure in 1965, but the idea did not easily become reality. The Port had made an extraordinary piece of land available (valued at \$250,000 in 1970) but funding for the building and other structures was not readily available. It was hard sell, I imagine, to raise funds for a humanitarian organization that the good people of Houston could not readily see. So how to stir the passions? How to get people interested and wallets open? Even as it is today, the Port of Houston was out of the way, not on the beaten path of normal life in Houston.

The wind in the sails came from two places:

The main part of funding came from the incredible generosity of Howard T. Tellepsen, of the Tellepsen Construction Company. Tellepsen’s company had served on many major construction projects around the port and the city. A committed Episcopalian, Tellepsen was chairman of Port Commissioners at the time and felt moved to donate more than \$1 million in material and construction time from his company to build the facility. For good reason, then, this building was renamed the Howard T. Tellepsen Seafarers’ Center in May 2006.

The remaining funding came, when a committee of clergy added their support to the project, most notably the trio of Rev. Taft Lyon, a Presbyterian, Rev. Sam Duree, a United Methodist, and Fr. Rivers Patout, a Catholic. They brought with them the power of the collection plate—funds were raised from a number of church partners to help bring in an additional \$100,000 to build a state-of-the-art facility including a chapel that could be rearranged to welcome any of the denominational partners.

The vision was amazing: a made-to-measure seafarers’ welfare building complemented by pool, soccer field, basketball and tennis courts. A ground-breaking ceremony took place on April 15, 1970, but there was money to raise and work to be done before finally complete by the end of 1972.

Unlike almost all other seafarers’ welfare facilities, this center ended up being a partnership not only between port community and church, but between *many* members of the port community and *many* churches. From the beginning,

there was not one *preferred* church partner, under which all others gained access, but a intricate network of partnerships. Among other things, that all denominations were represented equally was novel and became influential for the development of a number of other modern seafarers' welfare organizations.

The center was officially opened in an outdoor ceremony on a surprisingly beautiful January day in 1973. Nearly a thousand people showed up, including representatives from industry, labor, cultural communities, and many denominations. Delegates from Argentina, Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, China, France, Costa Rica, Italy, Guatemala, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, South Africa, Venezuela, Korea and Paraguay were present. The Austin senior high school band provided the music and a group of six "charming majorettes" in mini-skirts "helped liven the occasion with their baton twirling."

A four-page special report was part of the next issue of the glossy Port of Houston Magazine to announce the opening of the "Friendly Home Away from Home." Houston's five-term Mayor Louie Welch declared the week of January 22nd to be "International Seamen's Center Week." He had sent his administrative assistant, Eddie Corral, to read a handsome letter for the occasion that urged "all Houstonians to visit their Port and this great new Center and rejoice with us in offering seamen from overseas a true home away from home, full of the friendliness and hospitality for which our City and State are noted." Indeed, as the special report ends, the "Houston Seamen's Center is no longer 'on the way.' It is here! But it is up to interested Houstonians and, particularly, those allied to the maritime field, to use that this finest Seamen's Center in the world is kept alive and running."

Not reported in the Port magazine was that, besides that big open-air celebration, the different denominational leaders gathered to give thanks in worship service as well. It was that Monday, January 22, and featured church leaders who were integral for finding support and a number of chaplains who had begun to visit ships. The cross-section of chaplains was amazing for the time: a Methodist, an Episcopalian, several kinds of Lutherans and Presbyterians, a Greek Orthodox, and several Catholics. A standing committee of chaplains from this diverse a group working side-by-side would have been unthinkable only a few years previous. It was the confluence of the mish-mash of cultures in a melting pot like Houston, the progress in ecumenical relationships throughout the 20th century in the World Council of Churches and especially after the Vatican II, but, I would like to think, particularly an excitement that the shared words of the Christian Faith might excite a common vision for service to other humans in need. The bulletin for the liturgy includes

the concluding note for all gathered: "We sincerely hope that you will find time, and a way, to serve with us in this ministry to the men and women who sail the oceans of our Creator's World."

During that service Scripture was read, hymns sung, and the Gospel lesson shared by The Rt. Rev. Bishop John L. Morkovsky, Bishop of the Galveston/Houston Catholic Diocese: he read Matthew 25:31-46. After, Rev. Taft Lyon, a Presbyterian, preached the sermon under the title, "The Earth is The Lord's."

Unfortunately, we don't have the text of the sermon, but I am going to surmise he said something like this:

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we are gathered here today to thank our Lord for allowing us to build this magnificent facility for the benefit of seafarers. We stand amazed to see all those who have contributed to the project and the great diversity of people gathered here today. We are committed to an ecumenical ministry that serves all the people of the Sea.

We come today to celebrate all the work that was done to build this center, but we realize our work has only begun. Though it has been already many years of labor to reach this point, we will soon realize that building the structure was the easy part of our journey. Now we have to be faithful in the daily work of service to seafarers. What will motivate us? How will we remain focused on our main goal?

We find that motivation in our text this evening. In this text Jesus helps us see the end of things. The whole of Matthew 25 is concerned with being faithful, being ready. We could read the parable of the ten virgins, in verses 1-13, to remind us that in our chaplaincy work we must be ready to respond, ready to provide the best possible care we can in any situation. We could read the parable of the talents of gold, in verses 14-28, to remind us that we are servants of God, entrusted with all we have to be of service in his Kingdom. No doubt, we should remember that this space is entrusted to us, to use in service to others.

And then we come to verses 31-46, the story of the sheep and the goats. It is actually a difficult story. A story of judgment and punishment. What can we possibly gain from reading this? In my view, it is the change in perspective, a Kingdom perspective, one that casts a vision for our work.

It would seem both the righteous and the unrighteous in the story did not know how to think about feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty a drink, making a place of welcome for a stranger, clothing the naked, helping the sick, visiting for the prisoner. The righteous were doing all these things, but perhaps it was out of a sense of obligation or ritual. They did do them, but were surprised to hear how essential that work was.

And the King said, no, these things are no add-ons to the Kingdom, but “whatever you did for the one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” Even the righteous needed to learn this lesson.

And our motivation: Kingdom work is found among the “least of” even today. Open your eyes, look. Where are they found? They are all around us, and one group that wasn’t being taken of is seafarers. Far from home, far from the family they love. Many have lonely lives, many spend the majority of their adult lives traveling the world’s oceans to make money for the betterment of their families.

We are called by Jesus’ teaching to keep our eyes open. Our work here is not only to be happy that we built a nice building and that we had a big crowd of beautiful people show up for the opening day. Rather, our joy should come because God is found here. Our service to seafarers is a service to our King.

Viewed another way: we have had and will have to work hard to attract the attention of our fellow Houstonians. The port is not a beautiful place, it is far from the more civilized parts of our city. So why do we come today and come back tomorrow? It is not natural for us to be here – we will become tired of this work if we view it with the world’s eyes. We come here because service to God is not only found somewhere else in this city, but because we find service of God here, especially in small acts of kindness to people whom the world has forgotten.

We can be excited that God is the God of the land and the sea: The Earth is the Lord’s. Let us serve him wherever the stranger, the hungry, the lonely are found.

These words – or something like them – might have been preached by chaplain Lyon that day. What a wonderful legacy of service over almost 45 years. We stand in a place that was once proudly dedicated, and soon will be demolished, dust to dust.

But the work will continue.

What will motivate us to continue the legacy of this place, indeed, of every seafarers’ center around the world? Like those gathered here in 1973, we can be inspired by the text chosen from Matthew 25.

The Earth is the Lord’s.

Amen.