

*The 24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 19, 2017
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend*

*Judges 4: 1-7
Psalm 123
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30*

A number of the readings over these last weeks have emphasized two basic themes—judgment and the return of Christ. They often employ apocalyptic language that was an often-used rhetorical style in the first century, especially by Jewish writers. Apocalyptic language uses vivid images, often disturbing images that highlight the clash between darkness and light, good and evil. Such language is found in both the Old and New Testaments. The ideas and images conveyed emphasize that God will triumph over the darkness and the good will ultimately win out over evil. We need look no further than our reading this morning from 1 Thessalonians to see both themes of judgment and the return of Christ. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul talks about the return of Christ, using apocalyptic language to describe the cataclysmic event and urging them to support one another until Christ returns. It should be noted that the Apostles, including Paul, initially expected Christ to return in their lifetimes, so the topic of Christ's return carried with it a sense of urgency.

This morning's gospel reading from Matthew continues the ideas of Christ's return and of judgment. It is the familiar story of the master, whom we understand to be God, and the masters' three slaves, which of course are meant to be understood as us. First, let me say that this parable has been interpreted in a variety of ways. There are certain televangelists, for example, that preach what I refer to as the gospel of prosperity. Simply put, if you are a faithful follower of Jesus, it is God's great desire to make you materially rich. This parable is often used as evidence of that idea. My response to that interpretation is a simple one – hogwash. I think we all know that there are many devoted followers of our Lord who are not materially rich, but certainly rich in other ways.

Another popular interpretation of the parable of the talents, which I believe does have much merit, is that God has entrusted us with great talents, which God expects that we will use to the benefit of the Kingdom. The more that we use them effectively additional resources will be given to us to continue God's work. In stewardship sermons, this parable is often referenced as a perfect example of how we are to use not only our material

resources, but also our time and abilities to further the work to which our Lord has called us. As worthy and relevant as that interpretation might be, there is a third that I would like to explore.

In the story told by Jesus in this parable, the master distributes varying amounts of talents to three of his slaves. To the first, he gives five talents, to the second two, and to the last slave just one. First we need to understand that in Jesus' time a talent equaled fifteen years of wages. So while the amount entrusted to each slave varied, even one talent was enormously valuable. We can speculate on why each received a different amount. Frankly we don't know because story does not tell us, but we can assume that the master entrusted the talents based on his knowledge of the abilities of each slave.

It may be tempting to feel sorry for the third slave that only received the one talent. The story tells us that the slave buried the one talent because of fear of the master, whom the slave called "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." The master in turn responded by calling the slave wicked and lazy. What then are we to make of this complex parable? Why did the master react so harshly? Was the third slave right about the master? After all, what the third slave did was to protect the master's property. There is one phrase that I think is key to understanding what Jesus was saying. The third slave responded to the master explaining that what had been done with the talent was done because as the slave confessed, "I was afraid."

It is important to understand the context of this parable. Jesus knows that he is headed to Jerusalem where he will be betrayed and crucified. He is working to prepare his disciples for the time he will no longer be with them and that they will be on their own. He knows that the path they will have to follow after he leaves them will be hard and challenging and that they will need strength and courage. Most will end up as he did, being executed because of their belief in him and their work in spreading the Good News of God in Jesus Christ.

We live in a world which seems, especially now, to be driven by fear. Richard Rohr, in his book, *Radical Grace*, has this to say:

The greatest enemy of faith is not doubt; the greatest enemy of faith is fear. Most of the world is controlled by fear, petty and big. Petty fears control people; great fears

control nations. We could feed all the people in this world if we would stop building arms, but we are afraid. In the Beatitudes (*found in the Sermon on the Mount*) Jesus said, "Those of you who make peace will be happy. You will be God's own." Yet even Christians are preoccupied with fear and protecting ourselves because we don't believe what Jesus said. The Sermon on the Mount is an antidote to fear. But we have never seen fear as the crucial issue, only "doubt."

What Jesus was saying to the disciples and to us, is be bold, take risks with the resources God has given us. The Kingdom of God is not for the timid. That is exactly what the disciples would go on to do after Jesus left them to rejoin God. That, my friends, is what God is asking of us—be bold in our individual and collective ministry to the world. One might ask what would have happened if the two slaves who earned a significant profit for their master had failed? Of course we cannot know for sure, but I suspect the master having heard the attempts that each had made to expand the value of what the master had entrusted to them, would still have congratulated them on their efforts. The third slave's sin was not in being prudent, being prudent with the resources God gives us is always a wise course. Rather, it was in acting out of fear and doing nothing.

Turning our attention to the theme of judgment in this parable, the story tells us that the master condemns the third slave to outer darkness. This idea may make us all uncomfortable. Is God's judgment real? Are we, too, going to face judgment? This parable, as well as other places in the New Testament, does indicate that we will face an accounting. However, Paul reassures the Thessalonians and us that "God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ." My mother used to say that we could make heaven out of hell or hell out of heaven. The truth is, the slave was already in outer darkness. Fear does that to a person.

Donald Dotterer, a Methodist pastor and author, in his book *Living the Easter Faith*, tells this story:

Steven Jobs is the man who founded the enormously successful company called Apple Computer. Jobs decided that Mr. John Sculley was the man needed to help him

fulfill his dream of building a completely different kind of computer company, one which would make computers available to every person in the world. However, Mr. Sculley was comfortably and safely entrenched as president of the Pepsico Corporation, the makers of the soft drink Pepsi. In this position, John Sculley had achieved everything that a man could want: power, prestige, public recognition, an enormous salary and a secure future. The thought of a career change requiring a move to the West Coast frightened him. He was concerned about losing pensions and deferred compensation and the adjustment to living in California, in other words, he says, “the pragmatic stuff that preoccupies the middle-aged.” *(He adds)* “I was overly concerned with what would happen next week and the week after next.”

John Sculley knew that he was safe and happy at Pepsico. But he also knew that he had grown to dislike the competitive nature of the business. He also knew how bored he was. Steven Jobs at Apple Computer sensed this. And so he finally confronted his new friend with this pointed question. He said to John, “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?” That question penetrated deep into the heart and mind of John Sculley. It changed the course of his life. He therefore went to Apple Computer and helped it to grow into one of the most successful corporations in the world. Mr. Sculley’s life was changed because he took the risk and decided to invest. Was it a risk? Yes. But without it, there would be no reward.

The words “fear not” or “be not afraid” appear in the Bible 365 times. Think about that. Jesus told his disciples that faith could move mountains. Today, we tend to look on that statement as hyperbole. In truth, we don’t believe we can move mountains. But, Jesus reminds us that faith is essential to accomplishing the work of the Kingdom. So we have a choice, what will it be—faith or fear? What are we as followers of Jesus Christ prepared to risk? I will admit that today’s readings contain some heavy themes. So I would like to close with a humorous story that nonetheless underscores the point that how we see the world and our

relationship to God can make a huge difference. It can make the impossible possible. It can move mountains.

There were once two identical twins. They were alike in every way but one. One was a hope-filled optimist who saw the bright side of life. The other was a dark pessimist, who saw the down side in every situation. The parents were so worried about the extremes of optimism and pessimism in their boys they took them to the doctor. The doctor suggested a plan. "On their next birthday give the pessimist a shiny new bike, but give the optimist only a pile of manure." It seemed a fairly extreme thing to do. After all the parents had always treated their boys equally. But in this instance they decided to try the Doctor's advice. So when the twin's birthday came round they gave the pessimist the most expensive, top of the line, racing bike a child has ever owned. When he saw the bike his first words were, "I'll probably crash and break my leg." To the optimist they gave a carefully wrapped box of manure. He opened it, looked puzzled for a moment, then ran outside screaming, "You can't fool me! Where there's this much manure, there's just gotta be a pony around here somewhere!"