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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Year A/Proper 28/Judges 4:1-7, Psalm 123, I Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30.

“Non-Fundamentalists”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

At every Sunday morning Eucharist, our second prayer is what is referred to as the “Collect of the Day.” Today’s “collect” is one that tends to grab our attention more than some others. “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.” That’s a mouthful—and it is a bold affirmation of what we believe as “non-fundamentalist” Christians—concerning the Bible. First, most of us believe, if we think about it at all, that God did not actually write or dictate the words of the Bible—that God has caused the scripture to be written by working and continuing to work through people of faith—inspiring them to share their understanding of who God is and how God works. Second, that holy scripture is something that can’t always or even usually be understood through speed-reading and immediate acceptance at face-value. It requires time and reflection and intention—hearing, reading, marking, learning, digesting. And, third, the purpose of holy scripture is to be life-giving—to transform rather than simply to inform. We enter into a relationship with God through scripture. Scripture is a lens through which we see God, and that is why we call it the word of God.

This collect can be especially instructive when it comes to consideration of what today’s gospel reading might mean to us. It is a difficult reading. We could say that Matthew is “on a

roll.” We are in the midst of several “judgment” parables that are not pleasing to hear. Others include the story of the foolish bridesmaids who don’t make it into the wedding banquet because they neglect to get enough oil for their lamps, and the story of the Son of Man separating the sheep from the goats and condemning the goats to eternal punishment.

The place to start in understanding scripture is to contextualize—to strive to hear it through the ears of those who first heard it. Jesus is not speaking to a twenty-first century audience which, as we know, is frequently preoccupied with the local economy, the national economy, and the global economy—hearing “the numbers” or watching them stream across the television screen many times a day. Instead, Jesus is speaking in the midst of a hostile political situation, and he is speaking harsh words in order to make his points. He is facing his own end, and he won’t have many opportunities to continue to convince his disciples and others around him that things have to change and that they will need to be ready to take huge risks in bringing about these changes. He’s looking death in the eye, and that gives him a sharp perspective on what he knows to be important. He has no time to waste. He needs to get their attention now.

Last Sunday, when we were looking at the reading from Matthew about the bridesmaids that were locked out of the wedding feast, I suggested that our main take-away from that reading might be about “waiting” or about “trust”—that the bridesmaids can’t “wait” because they don’t “trust” that there will be extra oil provided for them at the banquet and that they, therefore, think that they need to trust in their own power to provide the resources. While they are busy trying to provide the oil for themselves, the door to the banquet is closed.

There are trust issues going on in today’s reading as well. The story begins with an act of trust. The wealthy master entrusts his slaves with an extraordinary amount of money. In Jesus’

day, according to various sources, one talent was the equivalent of a day laborer's salary for fifteen years. So, that means that two talents would be a laborer's salary for 30 years, and that five talents would be the salary for 75 years. At any level, that's a lot of money. And this trusting master doesn't even give these guys any instructions on what to do with the money. So here they are with resources far beyond their wildest imagination—maybe the equivalent of winning a lottery. Most of us have let our minds wander to the fantasy of what we would do if we won a lottery—Would we keep working or would we quit before the day is over? How much would we give away? How about setting up a trust fund for Grace Church? Many of us wouldn't know what to do with the money and our first step might be to hire a consultant or investment counselor. Well, these guys in Matthew's story, have won at the equivalent of Powerball and they don't have consultants to turn to, and now they have to figure out how to use the money well and even make more money for their master. They know the money doesn't really belong to them and that they will have to account for it—not knowing whether or not they will get some sort of “cut” in the earnings—or if their reward will only be the master's pleasure.

By the time the master returns after a long absence and settles accounts, the first slave has doubled his money, and, at minimum wage these days, that would be somewhere in the millions of dollars. The text suggests that their trustworthiness has paid off and that they will now have a share. “You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” Except for the poor “loser” who tries to blame the master—“I knew you were harsh and demanding, and I was afraid.” That excuse simply won't fly!

Jesus' main point in this particular parable is not about making good investments and doubling the value of the principal. Jesus' main point has to do with something that we all know

within ourselves—that we all experience—some more than others. We believe in a God who’s not big on “fear.” We hear the words over and over throughout scripture—“Do not be afraid.” So, as the parable unfolds, we can be sure that the master’s blood pressure soars as soon as he learns that the third slave has made his decision based on fear. “I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.” The slave hasn’t squandered the money or used it selfishly. Out of fear, he has simply hidden it.

Obedying the command to “not be afraid,” or, as some versions of the Bible put it, “Fear not,” is remarkably challenging. It is so human to be afraid. That fear may have to do with financial risks or with actual threats to life and safety, but more often it has to do with that other definition of “talent.” We fear to use the abilities with which we have been gifted. Too often we think of “gifted” as meaning being head and shoulders above others—maybe being one of the best, if not the best. And so, we don’t use our talents because we’re afraid of coming up short. We don’t look at being “good enough” as being “good enough.” We dig holes and hide our gifts away. We de-value them. We are so fearful of using them and being seen as lacking that we choose instead to not use them at all.

In our own context, we don’t see the practice of our faith as a high-risk or fear-filled venture. Despite the recent horrible tragedy in Texas, it still seems to be pretty safe to attend church and worship God regularly, to say our prayers, to treat other people well, to be honest and responsible citizens. But God always wants and even demands much more than that from us. God wants all that we are and all that we have. God wants us to commit ourselves to the creation of an alternative kingdom—a different sort of world right here on earth. And that can get risky. Everyone doesn’t understand or appreciate what we do when we try to love God with our whole

hearts and our neighbors as our selves. There will be people who think we are foolish. There will be people who strongly disagree with us. There will be situations which demand all our courage and strength. Our attitudes and positions will not always coincide with conventional wisdom. In God's kingdom, justice and compassion reign. In God's kingdom, all are one—none are well until all are well, none are free until all are free, no stomachs are satisfied until all stomachs are satisfied.

We believe that God cares a lot about what we do with what we have been given—materially, intellectually, emotionally. Our lives are so bound up with the life of God that, when we try to keep what we have been given only for ourselves and for those we are most attached to, we may find ourselves “weeping and gnashing our teeth,” in a self-imposed “outer darkness.” We believe that God invites each of us into a relationship of trust so that we are freed from the bondage of fear and enabled to take the risks necessary to truly be followers of Jesus Christ.

Amen.