

Pentecost 24 November 15 2020 proper 28

Unfortunately, the news is not good! That's not the best way to start a sermon, but it seems to be the case. The rate of virus infections is, as I'm sure all of you are aware, is rapidly increasing and there seems to be even a worse forecast ahead. Even though we did have some good news this week about some of the possible vaccines showing great promise, it will be a good six or seven months before vaccinations will be able to control the spread of the virus. This bad news has even caught up with us here in Vermont. Governor Scott and our team of Vermont public health officials are going to great lengths to make sure that good public health measures are in place to prevent a real crisis, so it is up to all of us, you and me, to make sure we take care of ourselves and take care of others as well. That is, of course, the only way to control the spread of the virus now and to bring infections under control. That is as well one of the most difficult aspects of this pandemic, the loss of control we all experience. Now, as we face again a period of stricter physical distancing and isolation, limiting our contacts to the absolutely essential and no more, staying home as much as we possibly can, this loss of control may seem even more pronounced. But we have to be completely honest with ourselves and admit that this is the right thing to do, for others by taking care of ourselves. This pandemic is just outright insidious. No other way to face it, and that's not good. Earlier this week as the news kept getting more and more grim, I thought about the earlier days of the outbreak, back in March and April as we faced the first part of our lockdown. As I wrote in our most recent newsletter, "This global pandemic has now gone on for months and this week I recalled some of the early weeks of our collective actions to flatten the curve and stay safe. I remembered that early on, even though many events were cancelled, we proclaimed that God's love was not cancelled, that our mission was not cancelled and that our time of prayer together will never be cancelled. I also remembered that at Easter, as we proclaimed Christ's resurrection, we saw the empty streets and church pews as a great act of love, our solidarity in taking care of one another. In the days yet to come, we will need to show this same love again to get control of the pandemic and spread of the virus. Ours is an Easter faith, believing in Christ's triumphant love even in these dark, dreary days of November."

Prayer: Most merciful and glorious God, in these tragic and uncertain times, still your Word speaks to us. May we hear today of your never failing love and there find our hope to transform our lives. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

I love the "Parable of the Talents" that we just heard. It is one of the stories Jesus tells that we only hear from Matthew's Gospel, and it of course ends in that

wonderfully gruesome Matthew fashion with someone cast out into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Traditionally this parable has usually been interpreted by most commentators, and certainly most preachers I have heard, as a story that as Christians we must work hard for the Kingdom and not squander the gifts God bestows on us. That is a wonderful message, of course, often used when parishes are doing a Stewardship Campaign and looking to get the members to make a pledge for the coming year, but I do not think that this message accurately reflects what goes on in this story.

My understanding of this parable was completely changed by reading William Herzog's book, *Parables as Subversive Speech*. Herzog argues that to understand this story, we need to recapture the place of Jesus' hearers, the peasants and small farmers of Galilee and Palestine in the first century. A 'talent' was an enormous sum of money (perhaps as much as quarter of a million dollars by today's standards) and therefore the man who goes on the journey is extremely wealthy and entrusts these slaves with about \$2 million, an amount beyond the wildest dreams of the peasants listening to Jesus. They were oppressed and exploited by the wealthy large landowners in Palestine as part of the vast oppressive economy of the Roman Empire. The first two slaves, by doubling the return on the money continue this economy of exploitation and oppression. The third slave, however, "opts out." He takes the money out of circulation, stops the exploitation and refuses to participate in an economy of oppression. I think the key to this interpretation is the way in which he addresses his master; he says, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed," essentially calling out this cruel master as one who robs and cheats others of what is their in order to get ahead and line his own pockets. This is not how anyone would address God Almighty (the traditional understanding of the "master"), but the way in which a 'whistle-blower' would tell the truth which most people prefer not to see. And like most 'whistle-blowers,' both in Jesus' time and in our own day, the fate of a 'whistle-blower' is usually not pretty; he is thrown into, "the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This is not an easy parable for a sermon! Not a lot of "Good News" here. But I think Jesus tells this story to show us the depth and force of evil in the world and the cost of being a truth-teller. I think Jesus' original hearers would have recognized this, and I believe we must, too. Many of the great saints of Christian history, from Francis to Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Martin Luther King lived in this manner and knew this cost. Each of these saints, and many others too, knew the solemn responsibility to tell the truth, to live fully in the light of the truth, and in the end were willing to pay the cost of that truth through great suffering and even at the cost

of their lives. As the last parable in Matthew's Gospel, I believe this same point is being made about Jesus' life, too. This is an ultimate word, as Jesus embarks on the Way of the Cross, he will come to that place of "outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth," but thanks be to God that is not the final word of truth in Jesus' story.

Perhaps Paul is at his clearest today in expressing this Gospel truth: in his letter to the Church at Thessalonica, he addresses our spiritual ancestors, and there is good reason to suppose that among them were battle hardened veterans of the Roman legions, who now have turned their allegiance to Christ, he tells our spiritual ancestors and he tells you and me that now is the time to face the truth. Not the easy half truths, the distortions and the outright lies of emperors and dictators claiming to bring "Peace and Security," but really they bring more night and darkness. No, Paul's testimony is that now is the time to put on the armor of light, the "breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." Going forth in this way, we bring to the truth of God's loving kindness, God's amazing grace into the light of this world. And as Paul goes on to say, in this way, "we live with Christ. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." This truth for Paul comes at a cost, but this cost has already been paid for us by Christ Jesus, so that now we are freed to live fully in the love and hope Jesus brings to us.

Ours too are difficult times. Too many in our nation refuse to heed the advice of our public health authorities, allowing themselves to be misled by false and distorted social media posts, or because of a false ideology of rugged individualism, a macho, "I'm free and nobody can tell me what to do" mentality. Too many in our nation are willing to put their trust in wild conspiracy theories and distortions and lies from some of our highest public officials, thereby undermining the credibility of our entire democracy. But the truth for us, truth that shines brightly even in these dark times, this truth is that we are to encourage one another, to build up each other, as we are doing and as we are called to do through our faith in Jesus Christ. Even in the uncertainty and even in the lack of control, this truth gives us hope, that just as God loves us, loves us and gives us God's all in Jesus, so we too are called to love others, to love our neighbors as ourselves and to show our love for God and for God's divine truth in this way. As John's Gospel promises, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free," indeed we are freed by this truth of God's love to open up our souls to our neighbor and to then do the right thing: to be responsible in this time of pandemic, to keep others and ourselves healthy as we work together to control the spread of the virus. We hear this truth in God's word today, and as we will pray together in a few minutes, we will acknowledge that it is

through the holy Scriptures that we may “embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,” of the truth that sets us free to serve in the Name of the Risen Christ.

As I close this reflection, I believe that the final words this morning are most fitting not from me, but from the spirit of the Psalmist who wrote the words I want to repeat again:

### **Psalm 123**

- 1 To you I lift up my eyes,  
to you enthroned in the heavens.
- 2 As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters,  
and the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
- 3 So our eyes look to the Lord our God,  
until he show us his mercy.
- 4 Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt,
- 5 Too much of the scorn of the indolent rich,  
and of the derision of the proud.

Thanks be to God. Amen.