

Pentecost 25, November 19, 2023 proper 28

I once again found another reason to be so blessed to live here in this Brave Little State of Vermont: a few days ago in Washington DC there was a Senate hearing, and one of the Senators, MarkWayne Mullins of Oklahoma, became very belligerent, challenging the witness, Sean O'Brien, the president of the Teamsters Union to a fight in the hearing room, standing up and ready to go at it. Just as he was getting out of control our own Senator, Bernie Sanders, the chair of the committee, forcefully reminded him that he is a United States Senator, to sit down, to cool off and to show some proper decorum. Bernie was great, lowering the temperature, and all I could think of was Jesus' words in Matthew, "Blessed are the peacemakers!" The late night comedian Stephen Colbert, though took a slightly humorous Vermont take on this and said, "You know, Bernie could have reminded him that he's got two friends, Ben (*holding up a fist*) and Jerry (*holding up the other fist*), that are going to keep the peace!" Of course, on a much more somber note, the war in the Holy Land continues with the deaths of thousands of Palestinians and Israelis, and this past Monday Most Reverend Hosam Naoum, our Anglican Archbishop of Jerusalem, spoke of the urgent need for all

of us to be peacemakers now: “I urge,” he wrote, “each and every one of us, and especially those who are Christians around the world, to continue to care for our world, for our creation, and part of that are human beings whom God has grounded his creation with those and created in God's image...as we continue to strive for peace and as we continue to spread the work of reconciliation, even though it falls on deaf ears at this time of war and violence and suffering, now we need to hold to what we believe in, because that is what God has called us for. And as John has recorded, one of the most beautiful verses that Jesus has spoken to his people in John 10.10, “I came that they may have life and have it in abundance.” So may the gift of life, light and peace prevail here in the Holy Land here in Jerusalem. And from Jerusalem to the ends of the Earth, May God bless you all.

Prayer: Most merciful glorious God, as we hear your Word, incline our heart to live in the truth you give us and in grateful thanks for your blessings. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

We began our worship this morning with the much beloved prayer thanking God for the gift of the Holy Scriptures, that Biblical

witness that we may, “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” for a blessed hope in our lives. But with the lesson in Matthew’s gospel, I think, we hear a really confusing word, so that prayer certainly means there is some work for us to do. Perhaps there have been dozens, maybe even hundreds if not thousands of sermons, may delivered on a Stewardship Sunday, like we are marking today, that basically make the point we are given talents and God wants us to be like the first two slaves who took the talents and made even more talents for Master. A very nice sentiment, but one that has *nothing whatsoever* to do with this story Jesus tells. First and foremost, the “talents” mentioned in this story are a unit of monetary value, and it has nothing to do with our gifts or abilities to perform a task. The five talents is more or less worth \$100,000 today, and two talents around \$40,000 and a single talent about \$20,000. So we are talking some pretty substantial sums of money. The Master is overjoyed that the first slave is returning him \$200,000 and the second slave has \$80,000 for him, a great investment return. But it is the third slave Jesus wants us to pay attention to: this one has taken the money out of circulation, he has refused to participate in an economy of exploitation, the only way the other two slaves could have doubled the money, the third

slave knows that the greed of the Master and the exploitation of the poor are the brutal facts of this economy and he refuses to turn a blind eye and just play along. This Master is not intended by Jesus to be a proxy for God, as we so often hear in interpretations of this story, **no**, the third slave calls him out for who he is, a mean spirited, greedy s. o. (and I can't say the words here from the pulpit, but you know what I mean) and the Master accepts this characterization: in the Master's world the rich get richer and the poor get the shaft (you know, our Senator Bernie's rants about the "billionaires and the millionaires" should be ringing faintly in the background for you right now!) This third slave is a truth teller, a whistleblower, who resists the easy temptation to just play along; the third slave tells the truth about this rigged scheme of oppression and exploitation...and like most whistleblowers, like many truth tellers who resist the powerful of their day, the third slave is cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.

So what are we to make of this? What is Jesus teaching us? What do we "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" here? Paul, too, is a truth teller, and in writing to his friends in Thessalonica he wants them to know not to put their trust in the empires of this

world, with their easy slogans of “Peace and Security” but to keep awake, to be woke to the evils in this world, the war, the violence, the hatred and greed, to be woke as children of light, children of the day, living in the light of God’s love, in the light of God’s peace, in the light of God’s justice, in which there is an abundance for all, especially for those in deep need, those who need the hope of Good News, those who are the least of these, the outcasts and the people on the margins. For you and me, my friends, for us, to be woke is to reach out in the love of the Risen Christ to the disinherited, the downtrodden, the dispossessed. As Christ reaches out to the world, stretching out his arms in a saving embrace from the hard wood of the cross, so we are called in faith to be woke and reaching out to the world in prayer and faithful action and as Paul concludes, to “encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

“As indeed you are doing...” well, yes! Together, we recognized the loss so many have had in our community: put of that loss was something relatively simple: a way to celebrate the holidays, so we put out the call and the community responded, packing the Undercroft to the ceiling with holiday decorations, so that even in the midst of loss, a celebration can continue and then

yesterday morning people came, came to be buoyed up in spirit, and the kind word of the members of our congregation, the encouragement, the deep faith, concern and care; it was a little bit of a Christmas miracle happening right here. One woman said, “My father lost everything in the flood and now we’ll be able to celebrate!” Another was just tearing up in her grief, all the hard times she has faced, and now just able to return to a small sense of normal. And now, if you wander downstairs after the service, you’ll see what that miracle looks like now: the Undercroft almost empty, all those decorations now have a new home and bring joy to the faces and hearts of those who have lost so much.

And I for one am so grateful. Yes, our thoughts turn to gratitude because in a few days we will celebrate Thanksgiving, turning our hearts to God grateful for what we are given. As I thought about this earlier this week, though, I reflected that as Christians we are always prepared for Thanksgiving, because when we gather together each week, we give God our thanks for God’s blessings in our lives, we gather around this table, the Lord’s Table, giving God thanks and strengthened in that gratitude to open our hearts and souls to God in faith. Every Sunday we gather in this fashion, so you could say in truth that we celebrate 52

Thanksgiving each year, called to gratitude for God's blessings and the love of Christ week in and week out. This is how God calls us in faith to be woke, opening the eyes of our faith, opening our souls to God's love despite the hard truths of the world we now live in: God holds for us a hope, a hope found in these scriptures, a hope for God's peace. As Archbishop Naoum says, even in the midst of the devastation and carnage taking place in the Holy Land, may the gift of life, light and peace prevail...to the ends of the earth. Thanks be to God for this light and thanks be to Christ for the Spirit of love. Amen.