

25th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 11.19.23

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' (645)

This parable is about the church—whether the church will be entrepreneurial with what treasure it's been given or if it will be precious, self-protective.

“Here is your treasure,” one scholar of the Gospel of Matthew imagines the voice of the third slave speaking in returning the treasure to the master, which I now paraphrase. “Here is your treasure, your gospel, this which is good news for all, your message of love for those who suffer. We have kept it faithfully. We have buried it in the ground, which is what you do with treasure to protect it from theft or from falling into unworthy hands. We haven't used it to transform our lives or to spread forth your reign of mercy unto a woeful world. We didn't want to take chances. But here it is, undamaged.”

This parable is about the church—the self-protective, self-satisfied, precious-about-its-creeds-and-doctrines-and-properties church. “Don't sully the salvation with your gross lack of understanding. Don't corrupt this body with your lesser than ways. And don't get mud on the carpet. We just had it put in.”

This parable is about the church—the congregations that take the treasure with which we've been entrusted and get it out there, take some risks, stake their lives on it, by which it might grow; and those who take the treasure with which we've been entrusted and tuck it away for safety's sake or simply to keep, self-satisfied, not at all concerned about what that treasure is meant to *do*.

The mission is mercy, says another scholar of the Gospel of Matthew. And at this point in his ministry, Jesus is sick and tired (so says this scholar) of “religious traditions or ideas or people who get in the way of the blessings God desires to pour out on people in need.”

I once sat it on a church meeting. I was a guest there. I was there to be a moderating third-party, a disinterested friend who wasn't there to take sides.

A lay leader cautioned the group: “You have to be careful about what you give away. You have to be careful about what you give away,” this lay leader said. “You might not get it back.”

I stopped the meeting then, though it wasn't my meeting. I stopped it mostly for myself. It was like I'd had the wind knocked out of me. “What?” I said. “Listen to what was just said.” Can you imagine, for example, Jesus saying such a thing? What if these had been Jesus' dying words from the cross. “Be careful what you give away...”

They weren't, by the way. His last words were more akin to this: “This is my life, poured out for many.”

With this parable, we're with Jesus toward the end of his life. This, in fact, is the last parable he told, according to the Gospel of Matthew. We are with him now in the Temple, and

he's spent the week surrounded by religious authorities, the pastors and priests and bishops of his day, the charismatic ones who are as master of the whims of a people, and the serious-seeming ones who intimidate and obfuscate, and the self-proclaimed traditional ones who stand for time-honored tradition. We are with him among this most religious culture, though they were also as desperate and jangling and harried as any culture. In other words, there were a lot like we are.

It's two days prior to the Passover feast, the text tells us. This means it's two days prior to his arrest, three days prior to his crucifixion.

Somehow, he knows this. Somehow, he can feel this, like when you can feel a storm coming. He is as a man about to go on a journey. He is as someone who would have to entrust his property to those who would stay after him, stay and mind his business until his return, whenever that might be. (And like a thief in the night, that would be, come to steal our "good enough" and our "this will do" and our "status quo" for something altogether more of the reign of God. And I'd tell you when that will be if I knew. But since I don't, I suggest we all just keep ready for it, warm up, get used to something so utterly new and good, even now, even in the living of our days amidst this tired old world, something altogether more of the reign of God.)

This was a common trope in ancient stories. It was a common trope, that a powerful person would entrust something precious to underlings, by which he would test their character. For this, we shouldn't be too reductive about what Jesus was up to with this story, or too precious about it. This was a familiar set up for a story.

And he wasn't imagining the treasure he meant for the world as akin to worldly wealth the way it operates now in our capitalist system: wealth creating wealth. He was imagining, with evermore urgency, that the thing which he meant to bring to the world would be entrusted to others as he'd be pressed upon to leave the world, two days hence himself dying on a cross. ("Be careful about what you give away," which, if he initially was, he later came to think thus: "This is my life, poured out for many...") Just so, he couldn't help but to wonder whether they were ready. He couldn't help to worry that they still had no idea what was at stake. Really, who would take up this treasure, this mission of mercy?

The mission is mercy, and it is for all the world, and it could cost you plenty if you actually took it up. You'd get hate from people invested in hate. You'd get resentment from those who wanted to see you take a side, maybe punish the people at least *little*, the ones who needed mercy. Because maybe their need for mercy was sort of their fault. Maybe they'd made bad choices in life,

and now they needed a bailout. So, make them feel a prick of shame, make them feel at least a bit of fear.

No, the mission is mercy, full stop: which, who would take that up?

It's supposed to have been the church. Really, in this, Matthew's gospel, it especially is supposed to have been the church. Matthew is the only one of the four—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—that intentionally conjures such a thing, the church. An *ekklesia*, it's called in Matthew's original Greek, and it's translated assembly or gathering or church. So, the question is indeed one suggested in Matthew, implicitly if not explicitly, would the church take up this needful mission?

Because needful it was; needful it is.

This is a brutal world, left to its own devices—or it can be.

So, would the church take it up? And has it?

It's commonly said that religion has brought about the worst of history's crimes. I had as much said to me just last week.

During that conversation, I had the same thought I always have: "May I please introduce you to the 20th century?" One of the most violent centuries human history has ever known, its first half had two secular ideologies going head-to-head, the Bolsheviks verses the Nazis, and it resulted in about 30 million dead. Nationalism comes in a recent 2nd place, and with nary an argument over doctrine or even holiness—

which all has me fairly convinced that the problem isn't religion. The problem is people, something twisted us, whether people acting together or people acting alone, this which our tradition has simply named sin. A mystery, yet a persistent one and one with all too obvious effect.

So, noted that the church has not infrequently failed to take up this mission of mercy, it's worth asking whether it has ever succeeded.

A book I keep recommending for Book Club would have us know that story as well, the story of how, throughout its long history, the church has indeed taken up its mission of mercy, if best in local, interpersonal ways.

David Bentley Hart is an acerbic, sharp-witted lover of the church, a practitioner within the Eastern Tradition—he who has no truck with gross overstatements of judgment, has still less truck with lazy atheisms that equate a lack of imagination and a refusal to consider mystery with hard-headed reason and hard-hitting intelligence, which happens to be a habit of mind amidst this late modern age. If you use your imagination, you're not using your intellect, right? If you wonder about things, you're not really thinking, right? Serious-minded people need to ask questions whose

answers are baked in, a project many in the church have join in on. In many churches, any question you were to ask has an answer, and it's already known.

David Bentley Hart wrote it: *The Story of Christianity* in which he traces the two-thousand-year tradition of forming social politics that address human suffering, seeking to relieve it a bit, all with the conviction that suffering isn't something we need to endure but is something we're called to meet with mercy. Hospitals, universities, care homes for the poor and the orphan and the widow and the aging and the otherwise unwell: these all find their roots in Christian tradition.

I think it bears pointing out, we've never chosen this book as our Club read. This would often, in the case of other books, have me remove it from our list of ones to consider. When we're gone several rounds not choosing a particular book, I often remove it from the list: "Clearly, there's little interest." But I keep this one on the list because I figure, one of these days, we might choose to a know version of our own story that doesn't cast us as being involved in a terrible missional misfire, but perhaps as participating in something of God's grace, God's merciful love for this world. One of these days we might want to bring to bear some additional, rather long forgotten, facts.

The word "property" in Jesus' parable is an inadequate translation. What the Greek for property actually suggests is that this "property" is everything of Jesus up until this point. The "property" that the man entrusted to his slaves is everything, all the things there are; and in the context of the gospel narrative, it would further suggest that the "all" is everything Jesus has taught and done, the whole of his time amidst the world. The property being left here in this parable is the everything in the world that Jesus spoke of and to and among, all of which he would be leaving in the trust of others, in the trust of the church. Blessing for the poor in spirit and the merciful and the peacemakers. Light not hidden under a bushel but put on a lampstand so all in the dark might have means truly to see. Love for neighbors and strangers and enemies alike. Prayer-life that isn't performative but is transformative. And companionship along the way, an accompanying of grace and hope, calming of storms and nurturance for the hungry.

This is the property: the "all" of the life of Jesus—which otherwise would have the world as but a realm where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

It's funny to me that we often think this is a reference to hell. It's as if we have to imagine something supernatural to really get at weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's as if the world doesn't itself present all sorts of circumstances that seem to amount to but weeping and a gnashing of teeth.

What if the slave who assumed his lord was a harsh man and who didn't bother to do anything with what he'd been entrusted wasn't sent to hell but was sent to the world he himself had created, or at least had believed in, a world in which blessing gets buried and cruelty is assumed?

This third slave really believed in cruelty, anticipated it: "I knew you were a harsh man..." And there's something of human psychology that suggests this is true: you get the world you believe in; you get the fruits you anticipate getting.

We are about to begin a new season of the church year, which is all about anticipation. Advent, the first season of the church year, is all about a new coming, a new arrival. One Sunday from now will have us at the close of this current church year, and two Sundays from now will be the first of four, the first of Advent, in which will indeed be an anticipating of something new coming.

And it's so easy to await this coming in dread. It's so easy to assume that God's coming among us will involve something dreadful—a dreadful undoing, a cataclysmic clash between what it is and what should be, between what we've made of this world and what God intends. Many of the prophetic texts, both of the Old Testament and of the New, imagine such a clash as ushering in chaos, resulting pain.

But the degree to which this is true in actual experience is the degree to which the world as it is, is one utterly other than the world that God intends. If we here have gotten comfortable with the status quo, then the loss of it will cause us to suffer. If, however the status quo is one that we live our lives ill-fit to, like a pair of shoes that are too tight but are our only option, then something better fit will come as blessing. Something fit for our soft humanity, our vulnerable being, our need for mercy and kindness and love—this will be as blessing.

And get this: the one we anticipate, the one whose coming will be as dread to the known world: this one

Is a baby.

I skipped ahead five weeks. Forget I did that.

But it's true. A baby. Just like you once were. Just like I have been.

Who'd have thought? A mission of mercy, such like a baby needs. That's what's to abound. That's to be the church, which the world needs now as ever—this treasure that is our trust.

Thanks be to God.