



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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The Third Slave

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 16, 2014

The Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost, Based on Matthew 25:14-30

I have a confession to make. Now don't be worried...I am not about to reveal too much personal information, but in reading the story of the talents I have always felt bad for the third slave. After all, his master is a harsh man, reaping where he does not sow and gathering where he does not scatter seed; so the third slave is afraid. Have you ever been afraid? I certainly have. Haven't we all been afraid, at one time or another, afraid that the deck is stacked against us and that the dealer or the system—or maybe even God himself—has it in for us? When you approach life from a place of fear, the Kingdom of God seems like a homework assignment or an examination in school. Instead of being a way of life, the life of faith is reduced to getting it right or at least being sure that you don't get it wrong. This approach to life, the way of fear, is always a very hard way to live life. Options are limited and none looks good. When you are in the way of fear, you resign yourself to least-bad options, and then you notice that the very act of resignation saps any strength you may still have. You try to take the safe route; you preserve what you have and try to pass it along to those who come after you.

This weekend in Tarrytown, the Diocese of New York held its 238th Convention, which I will admit is not the most engaging way to begin the hopeful part of a sermon. But hang with me; I promise to leave you with some hope and I promise not to talk about the convention.

The fact that the convention was held at the Westchester Marriot Tarrytown, a hotel about two miles from the train station, is the only reason I mention the convention. I do not own a car and I live in upper Manhattan, and yet I was able to make it to the train station in Tarrytown in less time than it takes me to make it to St. Bartholomew's Church on the subway. The problem was what to do after I got to the train station in Tarrytown. Luckily the local parish took on the task of using their cars to provide an Episcopal taxi service. This was not only cheaper than a cab, but also it gave me a chance to hear about the church in Tarrytown. It seems that Christ Church attendance had declined to the point that when their priest left they could only hire a half-time priest.

This has been the story of the church in the last quarter of the 20th century. After the unprecedented growth of the church that followed WWII, when increased leisure time, good roads and increased automobile production led record numbers of Americans to join and attend church, all of a sudden around 1975 the numbers began to drop. There have been many stories about that drop and the reasons that people are not coming to church anymore. Some people claim that it has to do with the new Prayer Book, the ordination of women, or the seemingly endless discussions about the place of gays and lesbians in the church. My favorite reason for the decline in church attendance is that there are just too many other options of things to do on Sundays. The solution is of course for the church to insist on keeping everything else closed down and boring on Sundays; then everyone would want to come back to church. Undoubtedly this would make us popular, don't you think? In many places the church has tried to batten down the hatches and hold on to what it has, afraid that the current cultural deck is stacked against a faith that is almost 2000 years old.

What I learned during my two rides in the Episcopal taxi service in Tarrytown, New York, this weekend is that the people in Tarrytown did not let all the reasons for church decline stop them from hiring a new priest. They interviewed and hired a part-time priest, and they got more than they paid for. The church began to grow and is

doing so well that they have three services on Sunday, and the priest is working and is being paid full time. The driver to the hotel beamed as he told the story and was clearly glad to be part of a church that was growing. A day and a half later, as I left the convention, I spoke to another parishioner who was out side, and she was also proud of her church and its growth. I asked her to what she attributed the growth. She mentioned the Rector and went on to say how the new Rector had thrown open the doors and adopted a policy of radical welcome. They let everyone know—even gay and lesbian people, my taxi driver noted with astonishment—that they were welcome at Christ Church.

The experience of hearing these two people telling the story of their church and its growth touched me and inspired me, and it reminded me of the reasons I chose to attend St. Bartholomew's Church three years before I started working here. Like many of you who come from all over the tri-state area, St. Bartholomew's was not the most convenient church for me to attend. In fact at the time I was living in a church on the west side of Manhattan. I did not have to leave the building to go to church, and yet I made the trip across Manhattan because I knew that St. Bart's was special.

Like the church in Tarrytown, this church had fallen on hard times but had not let their stories about those times limit the ways in which they were committed to living the Christian life. This church, where the term radical welcome was coined, was full of people and possibilities. One of the best parts of being a priest here is that when I am not here people are always telling me how this church and its radical welcome changed their lives. The business woman who stopped in for the 12:05 Eucharist and found hospitality. A formerly homeless man who slept in the shelter found permanent housing. The woman from upstate New York who came to the city to bring her son for treatment of a rare form of cancer found comfort by including his name on the prayer list. Even at the convention, an elderly man from the Bronx leaned over and told me that the New Year's Eve concert that Bill Trafka offers to the city has become the way he celebrates each New Year. These are just a few of the countless stories of people whose lives have been changed by the radical welcome of this parish church.

I had been a priest for over 20 years when I first came to St. Bart's. When I did, I realized all over again that the Kingdom of God is about not letting the stories we tell ourselves limit our possibilities or the possibilities of others. The reason I feel sympathy for the third slave is not only the fact that I have been the third slave, but also because the Gospel teaches us that our work is not done until everyone gets the message about being open to the God of possibilities.

Which is why at this time of year when we are asked to support this church, I do. I give a little extra to help finish the year we are in, and I make a pledge for next year to help the church have a better idea of how to plan. For you see, St. Bartholomew's Church is important to me and to the world and our work is not done. We are a beacon of hope and the standard bearer of progressive—not liberal or conservative, but progressive—Christianity where all are welcome.