



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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Faithfulness in a Time of Waiting

*Sermon preached at the 11 o'clock service, November 19, 2017
The 24th Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 25: 14-30*

What does faithfulness look like in a time of waiting?ⁱ

We're all waiting. And we've actually become pretty good at it. We were promised Jesus would "come again in glory," but he didn't return in the first 50 years when the Apostle Paul thought he would. He didn't return in the first 100 years after the Resurrection, or in the first 500 years, or even in the first 1000 years after his life, death, and resurrection. The disciples waited, and then the disciples of the disciples waited. Generations passed, and the next generation of disciples began to wonder if they had gotten it right. When we wait, we have time to think about things. When we wait, we have time to tell stories, even stories that explain our waiting.

What does faithfulness look like in a time of waiting?

"In Matthew's Gospel faithfulness is emulating the ministry of Jesus. Jesus has announced the arrival of God's kingdom by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least."ⁱⁱ Jesus explains what faithfulness might look like in a time of waiting when he told this story: "The kingdom of heaven is as when 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." Now to modern ears, the reference to slavery is jarring. What can we say, except we've come a long, long way and still we struggle with slavery? So, what's a "talent" anyway? "A talent is a large sum of money equal to the wages of a day laborer for 15 (some scholars say even as long as 20ⁱⁱⁱ) years. Wages for 20 years. Precisely as a result of the wide circulation of this story, the word *talent* came into the English language in the Middle Ages as a term for God-given abilities, "gifts and graces."^{iv}

This morning's parable is no gentle Anglican proverb about the virtue of prudent and cautious investing. This isn't sound financial wisdom from the Messiah! Jesus appears far too harsh in telling this parable about a poor slave who, fearful he would disappoint his master, takes a road much **more** travelled and does the very safest thing he can think to do. He takes the money given to him and buries it in the ground: a cautious man operating in an uncertain market. He does not invest it. He does not risk it. He just buries it.

Some say this parable was originally aimed at the religious leaders of the time because they were trying to protect their own righteousness before God by interpreting the Law defensively. Goodness for them was defined as “not sinning” and righteousness was defined as “not taking any chances of offending God.” Of course, there’s a problem with this approach; to love one’s neighbor as oneself and to live a genuinely righteous life require taking certain risks.

I recently read a story about a tourist in India who was passing a group of elephants. He suddenly stopped, confused by the fact that these huge creatures were being held by only a small rope tied to their front leg and the rope to a small stake in the ground. No chains, no cages. It was obvious that the elephants could, at any time, break away from the ropes they were tied to, but for some reason they didn’t. He saw a trainer nearby and asked why these magnificent animals just stood there and made no attempt to get away. “Well,” he said, “when they’re very young and much smaller we use the same size of rope to tie them and, at that age, it’s enough to hold them. As they grow up, they are conditioned to believe they cannot break away. They believe the rope can still hold them, so they never try to break free.” The man was amazed. These animals could at any time break free from their bonds, but because they believed they couldn’t, they were stuck right where they were.

Like those elephants, how many of us go through life hanging onto a belief that we cannot do something, simply because we failed at it once before? Just like those elephants, how many of us are being held back by old, outdated beliefs that serve no one? How many of us avoid trying something new because of a limiting belief? Or worse yet, how many of us are being held back by someone else’s limiting beliefs?”^v Someone who doesn’t believe in us? Remember the story Jesus told about the priest and the Levite who passed the injured man on the treacherous road to Jericho? What was going on in their minds? Weren’t they simply trying to stay out of harm’s way by not getting involved? They just didn’t want to take the risk the reviled Samaritan was willing to take.

It reminds me of a story from one of Garrison Keillor’s news item from Lake Wobegone. It seems that due to an “unfortunate marital misunderstanding”—that’s an interesting term, isn’t it?—between a husband and wife who were camping, a man found himself naked in the countryside one cold October night in Minnesota. Covering himself as best he could with branches, the man came to the house of two elderly sisters who lived together in the country. Seeking help, he knocked on their farmhouse door. The two ladies looked out their upstairs bedroom window and quickly snapped the shade shut. One of them said, “Why, let him in. He’s naked out there.” And the other one said, “We can’t let him in; he’s naked out there.” “Well, we’ve got to let him in; he’s naked out there!” “But he’s naked; we can’t let him in. What’s he doing naked out there anyway?” Stuck between charity and caution, the sisters left the man outside. How ingrained in the human disposition is the desire to follow the safest path always!

More than one biblical scholar has suggested the reason the third slave didn’t invest his talent is that he may have thought it was too small in comparison to what was given to the others. The others had been given five and ten times as much as he had been given. Some

of us can identify with that feeling, too. It's easy to believe you haven't been given the opportunities you should have been given. That no one gave you the chance. That you didn't get your shot. But even those of us who feel we've been shortchanged, even then we are called to be good stewards of whatever we have. The smallest things entrusted to us turn out to be incredibly valuable.

Jesus says, "Whoever would save their life will lose it and whoever will lose their life will save it." This saying has been heard through the centuries as a Christian call to costly sacrifice. It's been heard as a challenge to accept the sacrifices demanded by lives of caring and service, especially as the disciples learn from the dramatic scene that immediately follows this parable in Matthew's Gospel. They learn they can serve God by giving food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, welcoming the strangers, clothing those who have no clothing, and visiting the sick and those in prison. In that final judgment scene, those who are trying to save and preserve themselves by failing to care for others, do lose everything... EVERYTHING. While those who sacrifice and serve find their salvation. Being willing to lose one's life means being willing to risk losing eternal life as well.

The one sure thing learned from the parable of the talents is that one can't hold onto anything without risking it, even some of our most strongly held beliefs. It's a tough and painful lesson to learn and a lesson many people learn only after running scared for too long. I have run scared; I know what that's like. I've been afraid to give voice to my doubts. I've been afraid that my unworthiness led God to give up on me. And yet, after all these years, I find God still hanging in there with me, whenever I risk opening my vulnerable heart to His.

The parable of the talents is almost an "anti-wisdom" story, a questioning of really clear ideas about how people finally get and keep what is really worthwhile. It especially challenges those who see religiousness best expressed by taking no risks and by trying to remain pure and untainted by the world. Jesus can be seen as a model of absolute recklessness. He risks his life by what he says and by what he does. He's careless about his reputation through his frequent associations with the unclean. He takes huge chances in his acts of healing on the Sabbath, which the religious authorities consider a clear violation of God's law. He's seen as a blasphemer to some, a glutton and a drunkard to others, and an undeniable friend to tax collectors and sinners. Reckless!

I had an uncle who used to wear both a belt and a pair of suspenders. (It's a pretty good look in rural Ohio.) In his life, my father would joke, there were no doubts and very few unknowns. "One can't be too careful!" is what my uncle would have said in his defense. But if we're called to walk a holy path, we need to take risks and shed the baggage of fear we have hauled around for far too long.

What does faithfulness look like in a time of waiting?

It's taking risks. It's speaking truth to power. It's acknowledging what we know but are hesitant to say. It's recognizing things like governmental budgets as moral documents. It's asserting that Christ has an opinion about who gets what. It's believing that any public policy that takes from the poor and gives to the rich is just as wrong as it sounds. We will learn to walk where we'd rather not walk and do things we're not all that comfortable doing. If we're to be like Jesus, we will need to give up a measure of comfort and respectability, and that's no easy thing for Episcopalians or for anyone else. Yet, in the process, we believe we'll discover that peace which passes all understanding. And we'll hear the words one day that cause all others to pale by comparison: "Well done, good and faithful servant." Come and receive your reward.

And it's not just people who have to take risks. It's institutions. The church has to take risks, and I can promise you it won't be easy to do that. But when we do, when we do, we will know that we have been faithful to a radical God.

Amen

ⁱ www.Workingpreacher.org *Commentary on Matthew 25:14-30*, by Carla Works

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*

^{iv} *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 8*, Matthew 24:14-30 Commentary, ed. Leander Keck, et al, Abington Press, Nashville, c.1995, page 453

^v *Short Story: The Elephant and the Rope*, by Sofo Archon, from the website, "Unbounded Spirit," November 12, 2017