

For a long time, I've been fascinated by the inherent paradoxes in the theology of Christianity. We worship God who is both immanent, present to us in all situations, and transcendent, so far beyond us that we have no language to adequately describe God. We affirm the ancient declaration of the Hebrews, that our God is one, but also avow that God is "in three persons, (a) blessed Trinity." We follow the Way of Jesus, called the Christ, a fully human carpenter from Nazareth who is also the self-revelation of God, Emmanuel, God with us. I can't be surprised when some of our brothers and sisters in Christ seek the relatively simple answers of fundamentalism – the simplest assent to the most basic tenets of Christianity is a mind-boggling experience. Perhaps, that's where faith comes in.

The teachings of Jesus in our Gospel passage for this morning seem to set up yet another of these paradoxes that enthrall and frustrate us. On the one hand, "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." On the other, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required." On the one hand, grace, freely bestowed. On the other, what sounds very much like a demand for works to earn the Father's favor. It's that age old conundrum, faith or works. The world of Western Christianity was split over this question nearly 500 years ago, with resultant wars and continuing divisions, so I doubt that what I have to say in the next 20 minutes or at anytime in my preaching here among you will resolve the conflict for everyone. But I hope that through looking at this passage, we will discover some fresh truths about what Jesus said and find some ways to bring faith and works together in our everyday lives as we strive to follow Jesus in his task of bringing God's kingdom to life here on Earth.

One possible theme for understanding how these seemingly very disparate stories and sayings from Jesus hold together came to me this week as I was reading. After I left seminary, I only kept the most tenuous connection with the world of Christian scholarship. I still enjoyed reading works of theology, church history, biblical studies and so forth, I just didn't devote nearly as much time to them as I did to scripts, books on business philosophy and the professional journals of the theatre. So now, I'm playing catch-up, including the 2003 book by our own Rev. Dr. Charles J. Scalise, Bridging the Gap: Connecting What You Learned in Seminary with What You Find in the Congregation. It's a very scholarly work, enlivened by Charlie's ability to frame complex ideas in accessible language and by his terrific story-telling techniques. (I can say these things about him because he's not here today to be embarrassed by them, but I know he'll read this sermon on-line later this week.) In one section, Charlie deals with the ideas of George Lindbeck in his book, The Nature of Doctrine. Lindbeck writes that at least one function of Christian doctrine "is to enable members of the Christian community to speak correctly about the teachings and mysteries of their faith." It is as if we are learning a new language when we learn Christian doctrine, a language that enables us to at least partially express ideas that are inexpressible in everyday speech. Just as when we learn French or German or Spanish, we eventually stop worrying about grammar and simply converse, so doctrine gives us a framework to explore issues like the nature of God and God's relationship to Creation, a framework that we eventually accept as the basis of the conversation. In that same way, it seems to me, Jesus' teachings in this passage give us a kind of wild new grammar for talking about God. Jesus uses the sometimes mysterious-to-us language of story, parable and metaphor in order to suggest a new language for us to use as we seek to understand the Loving Creator whom Jesus called Abba. By entering into the suggested reality of these stories, we have a chance to glimpse a reality we are otherwise unable to comprehend.

The lectionary leaves out some ten verses of Luke chapter 12 between where we left off last week and where we begin today. It's a group of sayings by Jesus that are repeated in Matthew's Gospel, which we'll hear in another lectionary year. The gap doesn't slow down the flow of Jesus' teaching. He goes from speaking about the danger of possessions with the parable of the rich fool to advocating freedom from fear about possessions. His teachings to "consider the birds of the air" or "the lilies of the field," which are omitted, are adequately summarized by "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." In Jesus' metaphorical grammar of faith, we touch on the character of God when we use the images of Abba and of the Good Shepherd. If the birds and the flowers can expect to experience the care of the Creator, how much more can we, the sheep of his pastures, rely on God's provision. The assurance of God's knowledge of and care for our true needs should release us from the bondage of fear, release us from bondage to things, and allow us to invest our financial largesse in the care of those whom God places in our path. Through acts of kindness, the giving of alms, we participate in the reality of the Good Shepherd. We, too, become a part of the story and realize the gift of the indwelling Spirit of Jesus.

Through those acts of kindness, we also help to build the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of Heaven. In that way, we create the unfailing treasure of heaven, which is the community. To invest our assets in the community rather than in storing up possessions for ourselves, releases us from bondage to those possessions. Our hearts will surely follow our treasures. That is simply human nature. To work for the good of the community without regard for our own benefit is to truly have our hearts centered in Christ, who gave himself willingly for all. Those of you who've not yet read Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows may want to plug your ears for the next 30 seconds but I think it's revealing that finding the inscription "Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also," on a tombstone sets Harry on a path from which he eventually at least contemplates giving his all on behalf of his community. I am mystified by how anyone can read that book and still call into question the power of Christ in the worldview of J.K. Rowling.

In addition to recommending that his disciples explore their God-given freedom over material goods, Jesus exhorts them to be ready for acts of service whenever they are called upon. His story about the slaves waiting for their master's return may strike us as strange due to its imagery but the disciples who first heard the story and knew the images well would have found it strange due to its content. It would have been unknown in that day and time for the master of a large household to bind up his flowing robes like a common servant in order to serve his own servants. That's what it means for him to "fasten his belt" or "gird himself" as the King James puts it. Remember Peter's consternation when Jesus began to perform the role of the servant at the Last Supper? But it is perfectly in keeping with Jesus' understanding of God. When we are ready to serve, "dressed for action" and with our lamps lit, we will find that we are served. It is our readiness to be a part of building the Kingdom, our willingness to join in God's creative work that God blesses and rewards, not the work itself. Nothing that we can do can earn us God's favor, but when we are open to God's will, then we will experience God's free and gracious love. When we are enmeshed in our own concerns, focused on building this world's treasures, fearful for our futures, God's love is still there, waiting for us, but we cannot see and experience it. Our eyes are turned in the wrong direction, our lamps shining on the wrong things. Evidences of God's love will come upon us unawares. Only when we are watching through the eyes of faith

will we see them and understand them for what they are. Jesus' story provides us with the "grammar" to begin to speak this language, the metaphor to begin to grasp the reality.

Peter, always practical, asks Jesus a question. "Is this a lesson specifically for us, your closest disciples, or are you talking to everyone?" As is so often the case, Jesus doesn't give a straight answer. Indeed, he answers the question with a question: "Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time?" Some take Jesus' reference to the manager to mean that the lesson is only for the leadership of the church. Our own Baptist heritage would suggest otherwise. In our doctrine of the priesthood of each believer, we point to a verse attributed to this same Peter who asked the question, I Peter 2:9: "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." All of us are leaders according to our own gifts and talents.

So what is the lesson here for all of us? What does Jesus' odd story about the unfaithful steward and his punishment mean to us? I find it hard to accept, given Jesus' story-based grammar of faith that the point of this story is to fear the return of our King. "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." It is the world-view of the steward in the story that guides his actions. His expectation that his master's return is long-delayed leads him to treat his fellows as victims for his own amusement. He will do as he will, in order to fulfill his immediate desires. He does not believe that the master will come and reward him for faithful work. Indeed, he fears that hard work and fair play will have no reward at all. So, in his fear of going unrecognized, he seeks his to reward himself at the expense of others. He has his immediate reward but suffers long-term consequences. So it is with any of us who pursue short-term gain at the expense of our neighbors. Eventually, we end up punishing ourselves, for we are left alone and friendless like the rich fool in last week's parable. But the more we begin to follow Jesus, the more the Spirit of Jesus arrives in our own lives. If we pursue the selfish course regardless of what little faith we may have, then our conscience begins to prick. If we begin with solid faith in the love of God, yet still act in selfish ways, we condemn ourselves to the self-inflicted torments of guilt. The more we know of God's love, the worse we feel when we choose to act in ways contrary to that love. Since our understanding of God, our faith, is a gift, then truly, to whom much has been given, much will be required.

Jesus speaks of the faithful servant and how he will be rewarded. The faith the servant has certainly matches up well with the words of the anonymous author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." The faithful servant is confident in the return of the master, sure of his future presence though he is absent and unseen in the present. But he is also, as we say in English, keeping faith, constant, loyal, showing a strong sense of duty and responsibility. He is acting out his faith. Those old English phrases, "keeping faith" and "breaking faith", give the sense of action that is too often missing when we speak of faith in the religious sense. We speak of acting on conviction, putting our beliefs to the test. That kind of faith knows no conflict with works because they are so deeply intertwined. That is the kind of faith to which Jesus' brother, James, referred when he said, "Faith without works is dead." Jesus story of the faithful and the faithless servants gives us the grammar to speak of our faith in a real, living way. When our faithfulness, our assurance of that

for which we hope, is equal to that of the servant praised in this parable, then we know that we are living out of faith and not out of fear.

There is a great deal in this Book that I still do not understand. I cannot fathom why God, the ultimate Ground of Being, Creator of all that is and was and is to come, would take on flesh for the sake of that creation and still less why that Almighty and Ineffable God should be concerned with me personally. But I have faith that it is true. I can't make sense of what the Bible teaches about life beyond this plane. But I am convinced that it is real. With every sermon, every Sunday School lesson, every Bible study, I feel that I am wrestling with the angel, striving mightily to understand just a little more of the God who is certainly far beyond my grasp. I am continually amazed that you all show up to listen to my graspings in the dark, that the supposedly wise faculty of Fuller Seminary Northwest continue to send the next generation of Christ's ministers to me as a mentor. But that is my calling and that is our calling: to continue to seek the face of God, though we see but through a glass, darkly, and not face to face until we pass through the veil of this life. We are to pursue our relationship with God in Christ with the conviction of the things unseen and, little flock, without fear. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." Paul had his own struggles, his own trials, his own doubts, just like us. In that same letter to Timothy, he wrote, "nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." That is what it is like to live as a faithful servant of Christ Jesus. That is what it is like to live as one of the little flock under the care of the Good Shepherd. That is what it is like to live in faith and not in fear. Thanks be to God.