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Trinity Episcopal Church

Judges 4: 1 – 7

Ps. 123

1 Thessalonians 5: 1 – 11

Matthew 25: 14 – 30

All of us are, of course, gathered in an Episcopal church this morning, which probably says something about how we like our religion. Many of us have come from different church backgrounds and so, to a large degree, this is a self-selecting group of people. But, really, how do you like your religion? If you could start from scratch and create a faith system, a religion, what would it be like?

Some folks like religion to be clear as a bell: this is right; this is wrong. A religion where everything is clearly stated and not open to ambiguity or interpretation. A religion we can understand, for heaven's sake! A religion where, if there is a question, it has a single, plain and specific answer. A religion that can be summarized in a book with easily differentiated chapters, and fully indexed for anything that might possibly cross over. A religion, that is, with all the answers written down and not open to debate. And of course, a religion that is believable, without worrying about whether what it says about God is actually true or not. No puzzlements, no paradox, no problems. No room for doubt, no room for change. Religion that is completely worry-free.

Some folks, however, are not like that. They are perfectly comfortable with a religion that is a little loose around the edges, and not perfectly contained within a set of parameters or rules. A religion that can change over time and place and thought and experience. A religion that is open to doubt and questioning. A religion that is flexible and mysterious and awe-filled and puzzling and challenging. A religion that is filled with life.

The rigidity, sharpness, definition and certainty of the first way of religion is what gives people in the first group security and comfort. That same rigidity, sharpness, definition and certainty make the people in the second group cringe and feel like corralled wild horses.

So where are you in this spectrum? Many of us, by being here in the Episcopal Church would probably describe ourselves as being in the second group. We would feel uneasy, manipulated and restricted in the first group. The believability, the clarity and the certainty are too narrow for us. If you're in this second group – fabulous! That's wonderful. I'd put myself there. But...I wouldn't believe any of us. Including me. Not completely. Because, I suspect that way down deep in each of us, we long to have a God that would just give us a straight answer instead of a parable. A God that could be known and understood. A God that would present us with the TRUTH and allow us to learn it inside out and live with it. So maybe we're really all in the first group after all.

That's where the third person is in Jesus' parable in Matthew. The one given just one talent, and who hid it in the ground. And by the way, a talent is actually a fair amount of money – about fifteen years wages for a day laborer. So, in today's terms, if we thought that was about \$35,000 a year, a talent would be worth more than half a million dollars. (Two talents, a little more than 1M, and 5 talents about 2.65M). And while it's obviously something of great value about which Jesus speaks, it isn't really money.

Jesus is talking to his disciples how things are going to be in the end. Jesus says that it will be like a man going on a journey who leaves his large estate in the hands of some underlings. One servant gets five talents, another two and the third one, one.

The first two folks take their talents and begin to invest, trade and get creative with what has been entrusted to them. They each double what they start with. The estate owner is quite pleased with them when he returns – “Well done! I trusted you with a little and you did well. Now I’ll put you in charge of more things. You are a joy to me!”

The third person, though, has been much more cautious, in fact perhaps, paralyzed by caution, stuffing some under the mattress and the rest in a jar in a hole in the ground. No sense in being frivolous or risky, no siree. With an estate owner who is bound to be angry and retributive if things go bad, well, there’s no sense taking chances with a penny of it. This third person wants everything neat and tidy, clear cut, certain, and believes that the estate owner will appreciate the wisdom and dependability demonstrated. When the estate owner returns, in order to justify the lack of action taken, the third person says to the owner, “I know you’re a punitive man who grabs whatever you can get away with, who takes advantage of every situation you can. I was afraid, so I hid everything so it would be safe and sound when you got back!”

This, however, is not the answer that the estate owner wants to hear! He is not at all pleased with this third person’s approach. “You think I’m punitive and scheming, do you?? [Notice that the estate owner never affirms this person’s evaluation of him.] You could have at least put it in a CD and made .0032% interest on it! Geesh!” he says, shaking his head. “Burying the talent in the mattress and ground is not at all what I had in mind. That would be like lighting a lamp and placing it under a bushel basket! What a waste!” Since the third person has not trusted the estate owner, the estate owner chooses to no longer entrust the person with any of his assets and takes them away to be redistributed.

It doesn’t seem fair to us. The person who is diligent and careful, prudent and cautious, the one that we generally want to be the hero, turns out to be the bad guy by the estate owner’s reckoning. Someone who deserves nothing and who will be thrown into the outer darkness like yesterday’s compost.

Ok, so this is a parable. We get that. But Jesus, what are you really trying to say? Spell it out for us. How did this third person get it wrong? Well, Jesus says, the answer is in one word. When the estate owner gives the third person the talent, the person is *afraid*. Fear: that is the third person’s biggest problem.

Jesus is really not talking about money in this parable. Jesus is talking about the gift that he is giving to all of humanity, all those with ears to hear and eyes to see anyway. Sometimes, that gift looks like a pearl of great price. Sometimes it looks like a poor woman sweeping and sweeping until she finds the one little coin that she has lost. Sometimes, it looks like this crazy, wild, huge shrub, grown from a tiny seed, that is home to a raft of chirping, happy birds.

No matter how Jesus chooses to describe it at any given moment, Jesus’ gift is the grace of life lived in the presence of God. But in order to receive this gift, we have to trust in that very grace, accept the unearned and unmerited acceptance of God, and allow God’s grace to work in us and through us in this world. What it takes to receive this gift is not fear but trust. And that is where the third person falls short.

There’s nothing really wrong with a religion that desires clarity and understanding when it comes to the Gospel. But a rigid, predictable, indexable religion that puts God in a box? That kind of

understanding of God is often derived from fear. A fear of letting go and trusting God. A fear of something greater than ourselves ruling our hearts and minds. A fear of something that is beyond our understanding and comprehension. That kind of fear is dangerous because it allows us to fear God rather than trust the One who created us and knows us best. It allows us to believe that our doubts and disbelief and disobedience are somehow greater than God's grace, God's mercy, God's love.

God doesn't want our understanding of God, as limited as it is, and our trust of God to be buried in a mattress or a hole in the ground for safe keeping. God wants us to trust and to not be afraid. In order to know God better, we have to suspend our faith, be willing to let go of what we think is true, take some risks, so that a new, living faith can come to birth and grow.

So, suppose there is a fourth person to whom the estate owner gives the most – ten talents? This person begins to trade and invest, and, for a while, everything is great. The person, acting in good faith and to the best of their ability, makes some good decisions and some bad decisions. Something like 2008 comes along and they are wiped out. When the estate owner arrives, how will he respond? Knowing that the owner has praised the efforts and returns of the first two and condemned the third, the fourth approaches and explains what happened. "I did my best with what you entrusted to me. I have nothing to show for it, including what you left with me, but I did not just sit on it." The estate owner looks the fourth person in the eye and sees the heartache and disappointment. "Well done, good and faithful servant. Sometimes, that's what happens despite your best efforts. At least you used what you were given. You have trusted me as I have trusted you. YOU are a joy to me!"

When we are afraid of God, there is something badly wrong with our religion. It is not so important whether we choose the straightforward, clear-cut understanding of God, or the ambiguous, mysterious, flexible and challenging understanding of God. What is important is that we trust God and God's grace – with all our hearts and with all our minds and with all our strength. Even sometimes enough to let go of God so that we can then find God.

God intends for us to use what we've been given shrewdly, faithfully, trustingly, as best as we are able. In the end, God's judgment on us will not be in worldly terms of how successful or important or productive we have been, but rather, how much we were willing to trust in, and therefore to risk, our faith in order to know God more fully. It is those who trust and take risks whom God longs to welcome into the joy of God's kingdom.

I am indebted to the Rev. William Hethcock for many of the ideas expressed in this sermon.

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