

Sunday, November 19, 2017

24th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 28 (Year A)

Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

The Rev. Sharon Sheffield

When it comes to working on my sermon, I'm a big fan of looking at the collect first, and seeing what it might have to say about our faith and our readings appointed for the day. And boy, am I glad that we have today's collect before us, because otherwise these readings might just want to make us go hide under the bed somewhere, paralyzed by fear into inaction, dreading the judgment of God. As we reach the end of the church year, we hear more and more about judgment, and the end times; we hear readings calculated, quite literally, to put the fear of God into us. And those often aren't the readings we'd like to hear! Yet, if we are bold enough to truly believe that we are supposed to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest all the scriptures – even the ones that confuse or frighten us – then that means that there's good news somewhere in all our readings. It just may be an unexpected kind of good news. We know, as disciples of Christ, that God is not some cosmic bogeyman wanting to frighten us, wanting our fear and destruction. God desires our salvation and the salvation of the world, not our annihilation. So we just need to dig a little deeper into our lessons and find the words of hope that are, indeed, there to be found.

First we have a passage from Judges. That's important in and of itself – this is the only day in the whole three-year lectionary that we hear from the book of Judges. So I suspect that this passage contains something very important for us. Once again, we have the Israelites “doing what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” You'd think they – and we – would learn, wouldn't you? After so many years of being the chosen people, you'd think there'd be something different going on. But no – the Israelites forget to follow the ways God laid out for them, and so they are given by God into the hands of their enemies. But their defeat isn't meant to last forever; and, in fact, when they have learned their lesson, God tells Deborah to let Barak, the military leader, know that the time has come for them to be redeemed. This is the passage that we hear this morning. So we are reminded of three very important things: that we have a choice whether to follow God's ways or not; that our choices affect our lives, both individually and as a community; and that God is quick to forgive and restore when true repentance is shown.

The Psalm reinforces this last point – that God is known for being merciful. We ask God for mercy, expecting that we will receive it, just as servants used to look to their masters for equitable treatment. We are to turn to God in good times and bad, remember. It's not enough to praise God when things are going well, though it is very important for us to do so. It's also important to turn to God when the world gets us down, when we are not being treated fairly, when we need more than other people can offer us. We may say that a lot in church, but I think that that can be a stumbling block for us today. We often don't like to admit that we need help; we don't want others to know when we've “failed,” and sometimes those “others” include God. But when we refuse to admit we need help, we fail to give others the chance to help us. And we fail to give God the space to work with us as well.

Paul continues both with the warnings and the theme of hope. He acknowledges that we don't know when we'll be called to account for "things done and left undone." But Paul also reminds us that we're not made for destruction, but for salvation! God isn't going to be capricious and smack us down for no reason at all; God isn't that kind of God. God has shown us, and will continue to show us, what is needed for us to walk in the light and be alive and wakeful in a world that tempts us to live in the dark.

And with all that in mind, let's look at this morning's Gospel, the parable of the talents. You all know the story – the master gives different gifts to three of his slaves, and then goes away for a long time. Note that the master doesn't give any instructions along with the gifts – he just trusts that his slaves will do the right thing. And when he returns, two of the slaves have worked hard and can show the master a good return on their gifts. But the third one has done nothing, out of fear. All he can do is give the gift back to the master, unused.

So look at what we've got here. We've got two slaves, who got some use out of their gifts, and they are rewarded. And they're rewarded in the same way, though both the gifts and the return on the gifts isn't the same. So it's not really return on equity that's the point here. The point is using the gifts themselves, realizing their potential, and not letting them go to waste out of fear. Fear is the real problem here. God has given all of us gifts and talents to be used, and they're all different. We all have to choose whether, and how, to use our gifts. And we aren't allowed to use the excuse that we only had a little, and we didn't want to risk losing it, so we did nothing. There is no such thing as "too little to risk" in God's eyes – it's all there to be used. And God trusts us to use our gifts wisely and well.

What God asks of us is not a specific outcome; it's an expression of faith and trust that keeps us faithfully using our gifts in the way we hear God calling us to use them. God asks that we not be ruled by fear, but have the guts to take the risk of action, even though it's possible that failure is the outcome of our risk. What will we choose? Will we hoard our gifts, or use them? Will we live the life of faith and trust that God calls us to live, and live it now, or will we be complacent and think that there's time enough in the future to do what needs to be done? We know, if we pray and think about it, what faithful living looks like in this time and place. We need to choose to be brave enough to live that way, despite what the world says, despite doomsayers who tell us that the end is near, or scoffers who say that our gifts are so small that we can't possibly do any good. We have real power to make a difference in the world, whether we think our gift is big or small, because there IS no small gift in God's eyes; there's only good stewardship of what we have.

The worst thing we can do is not risk. Risking and losing is better than not acting at all. And not achieving what we set out to do, failure in the eyes of others – especially others that we care about – is a real risk, and it's scary, and we need to acknowledge that. Hiding our talents for fear of loss is a very human thing to do, because loss is always a possibility. Failure is part of the game. But we cannot and must not be afraid to act because we fear to fail. To do that is not only a rejection of the gift, it's a rejection of the God who gives the gifts, who has faith and trust in us to use them wisely and well, and who offers us grace if we fall short of the mark.

You all know that I'm a firm believer in finding the Gospel everywhere, and there's a great illustration of this parable in what you may think is an unlikely place. But honestly, some of the best theological writing right now is happening in the science fiction and fantasy genres. And one of the best writers on the topic is Lois McMaster Bujold. In one of her first books, called *Shards of Honor*, there's a conversation between the two main characters, Aral and Cordelia, on accepting and using our gifts. Aral has been offered the thing he most wants in the world, and more, the thing that he knows he needs to accept because he's the person who can best make a bad situation better. But he doesn't want to take on the job, because he sees it as a no-win situation, a test that's doomed to fail, no matter what he does. And Cordelia tells him, "Tests are a gift. And great tests are a great gift. To fail the test is a misfortune. But to refuse the test is to refuse the gift, and something worse, more irrevocable, than misfortune. If it's only fear of failure – you have not the right to refuse the gift for that."

This is where we stand, my friends. We gather week by week to rejoice in community and give thanks for our gifts and blessings. What we need to do is decide how we're going to use our gifts to the glory of God. It's our choice; God will not force us to action. But how we act is the measure of our trust in God and in our community; how we use our gifts tells the world what we think of God and of each other. We can refuse to act and bury our gifts in the ground, or we can use them to make the world a better place, knowing that it won't be easy and that there will be setbacks and disappointments along with the joys and achievements.

We asked in our collect this morning for the Scriptures to help us understand what God asks of us, and I think the meaning is clear. We can embrace our gifts and work for everlasting life, or we can reject the gifts and reject the God who has given them to us. We need to embrace our gifts, trusting in God's grace to help us with our work, and believing that what we might see as failure is really an opportunity for God to move us in a new direction and grow into something bigger. Let us choose to move forward in confidence and faith, trusting in the God who desires life and not destruction, the God who is our refuge from generation to generation.

Amen.