

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Oh, dear Friends, this parable of the three slaves, or servants, is so complicated and baffling, it could take a long time to adequately unpack it all! Like most of Jesus' parables, people have been trying to do that for 2000 years now, and yet there always seems to be more to explore and consider. There are so many moving parts. Who is the 'Master', for example, who has the authority to summon and entrust? Is he supposed to be Jesus himself, who is going away for a time and who, when he returns, expects good stewardship of his stuff while he's gone? Is the parable that kind of allegory? Maybe, maybe not. Would we expect Jesus to own slaves? Would we expect Jesus to be so harsh with a lazy follower? Would we really expect Jesus to be sarcastic enough to say: So, 'You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?' Does that sound like Jesus? But if not him, then who, or what? And the slaves, are they supposed to be us? This reading, by the way, is often used by preachers to persuade their congregations to pledge more money to the church, since during Jesus' absence, we should take the time to use our resources to increase his influence. But, in this parable, does that persuasion hinge on the threat of being thrown into outer darkness if we don't? Is this an allegory, or just an anecdote? What does Jesus mean when he introduces this story by saying 'It is as if'...? And then, remember, we are receiving this teaching through the lens of Matthew's Gospel, which always places more honor on doing good deeds than on saying the right words or having good intentions. We'll see some of that in next Sunday's reading, by the way. Yes, there are lots of ways to interpret this reading, lots of rabbit holes we could go down, but we don't have the time this morning. Like any scripture, I recommend you read it closely again and again, and let the Spirit carry you away as you ponder what God might be promising here.

Meanwhile, I would like you to help me explore just one important contrast in this parable: The respective differences between joy and fear. Whatever else might be happening in this story, the emotions of joy and fear play a central role in this understanding of the kingdom of heaven, its manifestation on earth, and its potential impact on our lives. Two of these slaves are invited into the joy of their master. Actually, all three are given the implicit invitation to begin with. All three are given the opportunity to find joy in their activity, but only two seem to know what that invitation is worth. The third, when given the opportunity, is, as he himself admits, too afraid to do anything with it. Fear paralyzes him. His fear seals his fate, or rather his giving in to his fear determines his destiny. His misunderstanding of the Master's real wishes has consequences. Fear destroys his life. Turns out, the blessing with which he has been entrusted doesn't fully count as a blessing unless it is used to increase the kingdom. Who knew? But it is the fear which is on his

mind, and which restricts his thinking. While the other two stewards are playing offense, he is bogged-down in defense. And he won't win unless he can get past it and try to make a score, of some kind. Forget winning the championship, gripped with fear he won't even have a winning season. He just won't enjoy it at all. So, I'm thinking that one of Jesus' intentions in telling this story there in Jerusalem, not long before the crucifixion, was to emphasize that during his apparent physical absence, his followers should not be afraid, but joyful. Even if it seems that he has gone away for a time, his essence, his treasure, was being left with them for safe-keeping. But safe-keeping does not mean burying his essence away, out of fear that we will 'blow it' somehow, but rather that his essence, his incarnation, should continue to be dynamically invested in the blessing of good deeds and important work.

Last Sunday I began to develop a metaphor about a wheel to describe how our life of faith makes it possible to travel down the roads we are called to go. I said it might be like a cycle wheel with a hub, some necessary spokes, and a rim to engage the pavement. And at the center of that wheel, at the hub of everything where all the energy begins, is the Incarnation. The Incarnation, which is what we discover in the promises of Christmas, means that God's promises have been made available and familiar to us. God's word is made flesh and walks among us, so it can guide and accompany us. So it can be Emmanuel. And from this hub, this central thing, there are spokes which proceed out to the rim. Some of those spokes, which carry the energy of the hub, the Incarnation, are scripture and traditions and beliefs and experiences. One of them is the teaching of the second-coming, whatever that is meant to be. And many are directly from the teachings of Jesus himself, as in this parable about the slaves who are invited into their master's joy. So, I think that this joy, which comes from the enthusiastic use of blessings, is one of the spokes Jesus wants us to properly adjust and understand. Joy supports our faithful life in Christ, translating the energy of the Incarnation to rim, where the rubber meets the road. Joy is a helpful thing. Fear is not.

Paul tells the Thessalonians to encourage each other, soberly but joyfully, and avoid the darkness of fear. Fear could cause them to seek the safety of holing-up in bed and sleeping, or cause them to try intoxication to lull themselves into a false sense of security. It could cause them to have a flat tire on their wheel, preventing them from following their calling to ride down the road towards the daylight. Paul recommends they put on helmets of hope for their ride and cover themselves with faith and love to protect them from the debris of life's highway, (not to mix metaphors too much). He does not tell them to be afraid, nor bow to any threat, but to confront what seems like sudden destruction with the joy that a woman could find in the expected labor pains of pregnancy. Something wonderful is being born. Be not afraid, for fear is unhelpful. Receive the birth announcement faithfully, and enter into the joy of your master. Amen.