

JUDGES 4:1-7

PSALM 123

I THESSALONIANS 5:1-11

MATTHEW 25:14-30

Lectons for Thanksgiving Day: DEUTERONOMY 8:7-18; PSALM 65; II CORINTHIANS 9:6-15; LUKE 17:11-19

Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost; Thirty Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 19, 2023; Year A

**(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)**

### ***Fear Factor!***

**So what do Michel de Montaigne (16<sup>th</sup> century), Francis Bacon (1623), Harriet Martineau (1848), and Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933), all have in common? The answer is that each one of them offered a variation of what became Roosevelt's most noted tagline, "We have nothing to fear except fear itself," the full context being "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear . . . is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and of vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. And I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days." One bit of sage advice I was once strangely given as a preacher is to not quote too many sources that are old but not too old, to rarely if ever go back in time save for the Bible, making a huge exception for the good book as ancient as it is, lest our preaching appear dated, as in outdated, no longer relevant, unprepared as if we dusted off an oldy but goody, a stale manuscript, from the file, making us look lazy, less than hip or up to date. Confession is good for the soul! We have all done it! I try not to make a habit of it, rarely turning aside and looking in my homiletical rearview mirror! **And yet these historic words made popular by FDR continue to be spot on, soberly speaking to our postmodern circumstances and situations, locally, nationally, and even globally. Yes, for such a time as this! These profound words remain current, their relevance standing****

the test of timeno doubt as all words and phrases of note continue to live beyond their first utterance. As we have experienced during these dark days, even the most sordid, the worst, the most evil and vile, and wicked, have staying power because all words have power, for good or ill, divine or demonic.

For our contemporary congregational context this morning the writer of Matthew offers us one of the few parables found in the first Gospel, another synoptic story attributed to Jesus that compels us to ponder the nature of fear and its always derogatorily negative consequences. You know the story well as we consider the parable once again, pretending if we can as with all biblical texts, at least for a moment pondering anew as if for the first time. As he prepared to leave on a long trip a master called three of his trusted servants in for a consult, giving each one of them some coinage, called a talent in some translations, apparently offering no instructions, no blueprint for success, but according to the text, according to their ability. The presumption is that they would take these coins and invest them wisely in some way, showing some initiative and imagination, some personal capability, that they could figure out things, possessing an intuitive level of creativity and ingenuity. Yes, these presumably trustworthy servants were left to their own devices, assuming they had capacity. Well, upon the master's return, the one given five of these coins, textually described as "valuable," produced five more coins, a one hundred percent return on the investment. The second servant, having been entrusted with two coins, produced two more, another one hundred percent increase. To both these astute and worthy servants, savvy as they surely were, the master proclaimed with pride, "Excellent! Well done!" And the master gave them more responsibility and invited them to join him in a grand celebration. Yes, "Come, celebrate with me!" Imagine a gathering in which master and slave partied together, had any kind of collegial socialization, any intimate interaction. That was simply not done! Etiquette and protocol be damned! End of story and even everyone lived happily ever after. Well, as Lee Corso would say on ESPN's College Football Gameday on Saturday mornings, "Not so fast, my friends! Not so fast!"

But there was also a third servant in this indentured triumvirate and he gets the unwanted attention, the undesired focus, all the negative salvos hurled in this story. This servant, perhaps already suspect because of the limited trust placed

in him, had been entrusted with one measly coin, a mere pittance, to see what, and perhaps if, he could do. Could he even manage that? Well being a scardy cat, we have another word that is not suitable for Sunday morning sermonic conversation that I will refrain from inserting here, he took the coin and buried it in the ground for safekeeping, in many ways a seemingly prudent thing to do. Maybe the over-thinking, over-functioning, servant thought the master was frivolous or reckless and would one day need a rainy day and be grateful for this conservative prudence. Kind of ironic considering the instincts of his colleagues who boldly risked it all. He self-righteously defended his actions, arguing, “Master, I knew that you were a hard man. You harvest grain where you have not sown. You gather crops where you have not spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin—uh, it was not his—in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.” Well, the master saw right through the “BS”, all the excuses, the whole ruse, every exotic explanation, all the ifs, ands, and buts, the plethora of inane qualifications, exceptions, and equivocations. Blah, blah, blah! And the farmer hauled another load away! Or, the master simply did not care the rationale behind such inaction, devoid of any motivation! The master’s response was a bit surprising, shocking even, swift and sure, judgmental and reactionary, his anger palpable toward the lazy sloth as he unleashed his wrath. “You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I have not sown and that I gather crops where I have not spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who do not have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them.” Ouch! “Now take the worthless servant and throw him outside into the darkness. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.” Oh my!

As I read this Matthean parable I was reminded of another story about the man who had the fortune of producing an abundant crop and prudently chose to build a bigger barn in which to store his bountiful harvest, telling himself he was now entitled to a life of leisure, that he could take his ease and eat, drink, and be merry to his life’s content. The problem is that he died that very night and it is unknown who benefited, irrelevant because the reader is never told of a beneficiary. Who

got the proceeds from all his hard work, his laboring by the sweat of the brow as he toiled in the hot sun? In this parable we read today we quickly can become a bit jaded perhaps, disturbed at what we perceive to be a lack of fairness, a lack of equity, the supposed prudence of saving going unrewarded and severely condemned as the poorest of choices. We all learn the risk of investing, that the reward is never guaranteed, never a sure thing. There are no sure bets, save perhaps the Georgia Bulldogs! Kenny Rogers' song "The Gambler" centers around the wisdom of knowing when to hold 'em and knowing when to fold 'em, but what goes unsaid in this ballad is the requisite demand to play them. You cannot win if you do not play! As football commentator and out-of-work coach Herm Edwards likes to say, "You play the game to win!" But we all know that losing is always a distinct possibility, a shadow that always looms large. **The writer of this parable included in the Gospel of Matthew does not seem to care, not concerned in the least about any inherent risks. The concern is whether we cast the bread on the water, whether we have faith in our ultimate decisions. And yes, this is a parable and parables as metaphor, as symbol, can only take us so far, allegories giving us a window into real life. Yes, as we are acutely aware, it is a parable about our faith, our stewardship, about our willingness to cast convention to the wind and see what flies. So much about this parable is counter intuitive to everything we have been taught, the hard lessons of life we have learned. Saving is a virtue, a bedrock practice that many of us were taught as children, especially those who grew up during the depressive days of the FDR presidency. Many living among us today still remember quite vividly what it means to live out of scarcity and not abundance. And yet, from countless stories I have heard describing those hard times, whether to practice generosity, whether to share, was never an option, but was always a major, a normal, part of the daily equation of life, as if an expectation, a joyful duty, no matter the scarcity, no matter the difficulty.**

In our reading from II Corinthians today the apostle Paul reminds us that if we sow a small number of seeds we will harvest a small crop, but if we are bold and sow what he calls a "generous" amount, that would be a lot, we will reap a "generous" crop, yes, a lot. In these economics there is no debate! In this epistle to the church at Corinth Paul writes what amounts to a wonderful sermon, declaring, "Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They should not give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful

**giver. God has the power to provide you more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. As it is written, ‘He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.’”** Folks, there are numerous texts in the Bible that need interpretation, even a modicum or baseline understanding, and that is when and where I hope that I am helpful. These words of Paul need no explanation, however, because they are self-explanatory. What part of being a cheerful giver who gives as able do any of us not understand? Yes, we get it and we get it totally!

But, and this is not rocket science, none of our giving begins until we begin. Each and every moment of each and every day we make decisions with the gracious gifts we have been given, no matter their content, but yes, coinage included. We can squander them like the reckless son in the parable of the prodigal, we can invest them, risking it all, making wise, educated, gambles, being smart, with no promises and with many promises as to reaping a reward, a bountiful harvest, or we can save them for rainy days that may or may never come, a reminder that we risk hiding them in ways that do not serve the common good. As a church richly blessed with an endowment, hard earned as has surely been, yes, I have invoked the “E” word—so many congregations live offering to offering—we have an obligation, we owe it to ourselves to make sure our due diligence always matches our mission, with what we perceive to be the always mysterious, illusive will of God for this local missional church. Yes, these are the same kind of decisions that all of us make at home in our personal fiduciary choices.

**Paul reminds us that in our giving, okay, time for the annual shout out to “Thanksgiving as thanksgiving,” okay I have said it, cliché delivered, that we will be rich, rich in righteousness, yes rich in every way, at least every way that matters. Paul declares, “Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us.”** Yes, we are the vessels. He adds, “Your ministry of this service to the people of God is not only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God.” Paul’s ancient words remind us that we do not need a holiday surrounded by family and friends, or a turkey, or even football, football, football, to be thankful and to offer our thanks, giving thanks for the abundance that sacks—football image—scarcity every time! As we all

**know, none of us would argue, that Thanksgiving should be a year round celebration for faithful followers of Jesus, not merely a oneday, annual observance, but a celebration the likes of which we never lose sight as we travel this journey of life. Paul reminds his reader of the mutuality of the intimate relationships that are part and parcel, the very DNA, of every beloved faith community, as we share of self with one another, as we offer graciously good gifts within and outside these walls., thanksgiving personified, thanksgiving in action. Paul concludes this lection chosen for today, “Thank God for the gift of God that words cannot describe!” And yet, Paul describes them with a profundity that speaks to every heart and mind in thankful appreciation, glorious gratitude, for every blessing this life has to offer. What a legacy! What an heirloom! What an inheritance! Happy Thanksgiving every day of the year!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and reminds us that to whom much is given, much will be required. And we have been given much! Amen and amen.**