

Sermon for November 15, 2020
The Rev. Peggy Trendell-Jensen
Judges 4:1-7 and Matthew 25:14-30 (The Parable of the 10 Talents)

Twenty some-odd years ago, Peter and I were getting ready to be married at St. Catherine's and I was determined to bring some interesting flourishes to the liturgy. My cousin and I wrote a song together, which she performed beautifully; a fellow parishioner made a large beeswax candle that our blended family lit together during the service; and our youngest son Sam, then 2, became renowned for the blue and yellow oven mitts he wore along with his wee suit, as they were the only things that would keep him quiet during the proceedings.

Now, as someone who loves tradition but also the opportunity to be creative, I was determined to avoid the customary reading from 1 Corinthians 13. "Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud." Good and true words, but my younger, perhaps more flippant, self thought that they had been done to death at weddings. So I flipped through the Bible, and flipped and flipped and flipped, and every so often I would find something beautiful and love-oriented, but then woven through it, or thrown in right at the end would be some dreadful-sounding verse involving judgment, mud-flinging, or the call for someone's early and eternal demise.

So, in the end, guess what was read at our wedding? You're right "Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy... etc."

My point is that by and large the Bible does not offer its spiritual truths in a pleasingly unambiguous, clear manner. It is full of what I call WTH stories; narratives riven through with puzzling or distressing verses that make you stop on a dime and say What. The. Heck. Verses that seem to glorify violence or tribalism, or to promote hatred or misogyny.

That many of the Bible's riches are embedded within stories we find morally complex or outright objectionable have caused some people to fall away from seeing the Bible as a spiritual resource for today. And it is easy to understand why people who have never been exposed to the Bible would be discouraged from even giving it a try after hearing about

some of its less savoury verses, and how they are sometimes used to excuse the inexcusable.

But of course, the Bible is a reflection of the ever-evolving relationship between God and humanity; a humanity that is complex, diverse, multi-layered, and woven through with darkness and light. A Bible that pretended otherwise would have fallen out of print long before the printing press was even invented.

I think about the Hallmark greeting cards we receive, their covers laden with sentiments expressing unalloyed love and affection and the assurance that we are, indeed, the best husband, or the finest sister, or the most valued colleague, that the world has ever known. They are beautifully composed for that moment – but as welcome as they are, how many of us can remember their words a week or two later? These sentimental cards very rarely acknowledge the multi-faceted light and shadow present in any person or relationship, and for that reason these very kind but easily digestible Hallmark greetings don't tend to have much staying power.

The Bible, on the other hand, weaves together truth, beauty and goodness with humankind's more complicated and challenging aspects – just like good poetry does. It is this unflinching look at the real and the raw that gives the Bible its ability to lodge inside our minds and hearts. It is this that allows scripture to be brought to life in new ways over the centuries, in art, in song, in interpretation and in study.

Prolific New Testament scholar NT Wright, when asked if he believes the Bible to be the “word of God,” always replies “God has given us the Bible we are meant to have.” What that says to me is that we are called not just to read the Bible, but to trust that if we truly, prayerfully engage with it, we will hear the word or the lesson or the encouragement God wants us to find. The word we are meant to have in our life, at that time, amidst all our complex needs and emotions and challenges.

There are many ways to engage with the texts. Through the practice of *lectio divina*, for example, that is, quiet individual or group contemplation. Through study; learning more about the audiences for whom the texts were originally written and why some elements of the

story may make sense only in a specific time and place. Through discussion, or even through colouring or making art. I think it is beneficial to have both an individual practice that frees one up to identify what is most meaningful to your own present circumstance, and group study, which keeps us all accountable to reading the scriptures through the lens of justice and mercy.

It is by such tools that we can wrestle with the WTH texts. And that, of course, is my very long way of introducing today's readings, because to my ears they both have elements of WTH-ness about them.

Focussing just on the gospel, we have the parable of the 10 talents, another story that made me indignant when I heard it in Sunday school. (I seem to have spent a lot of time being indignant in Sunday school!)

The poor fellow who just wants to make sure he doesn't lose his master's money and does his best to keep it safe hardly seems to deserve the bawling-out he gets when the master returns, let alone to be thrown into outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

So, what questions might come to us as we engage with this story? Here are some of mine – why would an honest person be punished for safeguarding their master's money? And if the angry master is meant to represent Christ on his return to this world, would we expect him to describe anyone as wicked, lazy and worthless? And what is this place of outer darkness – is it forever? Is this kind of punishment ever just?

I won't pretend to offer you one pat answer to all these questions, but here are some of the thoughts that arose in my mind in response. It is commonly said that this story is meant to rebuke those people who let their fear stop them from exercising the gifts they are given. Most of us tend to be somewhat risk-averse, and I am one of them. But when it comes to our life in faith, are we called to be safe or do we stand ready to be *called*? It is said, "A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for." So this story challenges me to ask if I use my spiritual life as a cosy comfort zone, or if I use it as a launch pad. There's a good question for all of us.

And let us notice, too, that the master gives each servant a different number of talents. Though we may fear otherwise, there are none of us of who have no gift to offer. God may not have imbued each us with the abundant skills, gifts and resources that some people have, but none of us are left empty handed. We are tasked with using our talents, whether modest or mighty, in enthusiastic service of the one who gave them to us.

But in reading through the parable this week, I think it was the imagery of the outer darkness that tugged at me the most. And I noticed that this isn't a vision of hell as imagined and immortalized in Dante's *Inferno* – there is no one being burned or boiled alive, there are no tormentors prodding the cast-out servant with fire irons. But there is weeping and the gnashing of teeth – and that strikes me as a description of someone plunged into deep and lasting regret. Regret for the life that could have been lived, but wasn't. An elegy for acts of compassion left undone, for broken relationships left unrepaired, for gifts of time and talent left on the shelf through apathy, fear, or spiritual laziness.

Wayne Dyer said it well when he said, “Don't die with your music still inside you.”

Perhaps you have other questions about this parable, or different thoughts than the ones I have shared here. Thank goodness, I say, for the hard stories of the Bible, the ones that refuse to offer up their lessons on just a surface reading; the ones that demand our attention and our ongoing engagement if they are to offer lasting food for the spirit.

A few days ago I was walking up toward Lynn Headwaters and came to a well-known spring in the roadside ditch by the side of the forest. There stood the usual line of people waiting with their collection containers, having come from all over the North Shore because they believe the water to be as pure and clean as one could ever hope. The spring burbles up through stone and weed, while at the same time water is filtered through the bank above, having travelled through layers of roots, rock, dirt, and organisms from the forest floor. It is, I suppose, nature's filtration system and perhaps the Bible is somewhat similar. We cannot be put off by the jagged rocks and knotted roots of

scripture, because it is through them that God's voice is filtered. So let us continue to work with God and with each other to find the living water in scripture, in the knowledge that God's ultimate desire is always to lead us to lives of love, faith, and compassion. Amen.