

Fear or Faith

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Crossroads Christian Church
Matthew 25:14-30 November 16, 2014
Pentecost 23A

A man, we'll call him John, got a new neighbor. The new guy's house was modest, but he had a huge backyard, divided by a deep ravine. John was surprised to discover that his neighbor had been a stunt man in the movies and before that an aerialist, a high-wire walker, like Nick Wallenda. The wire walker set up two towers in his backyard, about 50 feet apart, and strung a thin cable between them. In all kinds of weather, he would climb the ladder up one pole, walk the thin wire, and reach the other side. He would take all kinds of things up with him, to help him balance, or to make it more challenging. Eventually the neighbor moved the poles further apart and installed a longer wire. Then again. Finally, a year or two later, he moved one pole to the other side of the ravine, installed a wire that seemed to go on forever, and again, he practiced over and over again getting from one side to the other. More and more, he took a wheelbarrow across with him.

John asked the wire walker what he was practicing for, and his neighbor told him. When the time came for the wire walker's big stunt, John was there, too. They were at Niagara Falls. A wire swooped from one tower just south of the falls to another just north of it, in Canada. All the media were there. The wire walker was going to walk across the wire, over the thundering falls, pushing a wheelbarrow. John told him beforehand, "I just know that you're going to make it. I have faith in you. I've taken out all my savings and bet it on you, that

you'll make it." "You have faith in me, huh?" his neighbor asked. "Yes, I have faith in you." "Okay, you're just the man I'm looking for. Climb into the wheelbarrow."

What did John do? Climb into the wheelbarrow, or quietly shake your head and back off? I don't know. What would you do?

The disciples of Jesus Christ, during that last, tormented, tumultuous week of his ministry, must have felt a lot like John. They had accepted Jesus' call to come, follow him. They had followed, through thick and thin, through conflict and glory, through times of receiving amazing insights and times of standing around being totally confused. But now the handwriting was on the wall. When Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king, riding on a donkey, he had thrown down the gauntlet. Someone, maybe the Roman government assigned to keep peace at all costs, or the leaders of the Sanhedrin, threatened by the popularity of one they saw as a blasphemous upstart, would pick it up, and soon. So it was crunch time. To stay loyal to Jesus at a time like that took at least as much courage as it would take John to climb into the wheelbarrow.

Last week, you may remember that we talked the parable of the ten bridesmaids. In it, Jesus was warning the disciples to be alert, to always be ready, or the opportunity to join God's kingdom would pass them by, and they'd be left out in the cold and dark. Today, you heard another parable, the familiar parable of the talents, and someone else ends up in the cold and dark, out where there's gnashing of teeth and wailing. Last week, the women waiting for the bridal party were unprepared. This week, one servant completely misunderstood what his master wanted of him, and he responded in fear.

Jesus had said at another time, “he who tries to save his life will lose it; he who is willing to lose his life for my sake will find it.” And here is an example of a person who tried to save his life and lost it.

Three people were given great responsibility. They were trusted by their CEO, their master, to invest a huge sum of money while he was away. One was given a huge fortune—five talents—much more than most workers would make in a lifetime. Another was given two talents—forty years of wages for a day laborer. The final servant, one talent—twenty years of salary for a day laborer. Have you ever felt frightened, yet excited, when someone entrusted you with a great responsibility? Probably each of these servants felt a mix of fear and excitement. The two of them accepted the responsibility, had faith in their master and in their own capabilities, and did something productive with their lives. When the master came back, they were able to show that they each had doubled the fortune they started with. The last one, though, was driven by fear. He had no faith in either his master nor in himself. So he buried the talent in the back yard. He threw away his opportunity to prove his worth and to please his master, and his master threw him away. Two said, “My master has given me a wonderful opportunity. I’m going to make him proud of me.” The third said, “My master has given me a terrible responsibility. Whatever I do, he’ll be mad at me. So I won’t do anything.” His beatitude was “blessed are those who have no expectations, for they will not be disappointed.” His gospel was Murphy’s Law—what can go wrong will.” And because of that fearful, defensive attitude, he got what he expected. Nothing.

The fearful servant in this parable reflected an attitude toward his boss that many people have toward God—that God is quick to judge and condemn and slow to love. Thom Schuman put it this way in a poem called the bogeygod:

afraid you would
 smack my knuckles
 with a ruler, i
 kept my hands
 clasped behind my back
 and so
 you could not fill them with grace;

certain you were looking for me, so
 you could scream about all the mess
 in the kitchen,
 i
 quivered behind the door, hoping
 you would not look there,
 and so you could not
 gather me up in your arms
 to wipe away my fears;

taught to believe
 you lurk in the shadows,
 prowling around looking
 for a way to get in,
 i lock all the doors and windows,
 pull the drapes shut,
 turn out the lights,
 and hide under the quilt,
 refusing to answer the door,
 and so

the invitation to the party
at your house gathers dust
in the mailbox.¹ (unquote)

Jesus was telling his disciples—and he’s telling us—that if we’re going to follow him, we need to be faithful, not afraid. We need to trust. We need to overcome the fears that would inhibit us, and climb into the wheelbarrow. God has given us wonderful gifts—our own bodies, our abilities and talents, and most amazing of all, grace. God’s love has been poured out upon us. We who were once no people are now God’s people. We who were once slaves are now free. We who once struggled in the darkness now live in the light.

Some people have more going for them than others, the parable seems to tell us. But each person in the parable was given a fortune. Each was given enough to do great things. And two of them did them. The other turned away in fear. So it isn’t what you have going for you, Jesus is telling us, but what you do with what you have. I have known people of minimal intelligence and of minimal material wealth who have radiated love and peace, who have made a positive difference in life by doing the small things lovingly and faithfully. And I have known people with enormous power, wealth, and ability who have been twisted and destructive and selfish. It’s what you do with what you have that counts. It’s trusting God and doing what you can. The servants in our parables were stewards—business administrators entrusted with their boss’s treasure. We’re stewards, too, entrusted with that which God has given us. And we have

to decide—is it fear or faith that is going to be our operative principle?

This parable applies to individuals, but it also applies to congregations—do we make decisions out of fear, concentrating on our problems, afraid to take chances, just getting by, or do we make decisions on faith, concentrating on our possibilities, stretching yourselves, taking risks, trusting that God is with you?

In our Epistle reading, St. Paul was trying to help a church understand and interpret its belief about Christ's second coming. Some of the believers in Thessalonica were so convinced that the Lord was coming soon that they were giving up their jobs and letting their families suffer. They were so heavenly minded they were of no earthly good, we might say. Paul had to be careful. He didn't want their enthusiasm to turn into cynicism when things didn't happen on the timeline they had worked out. God's time isn't our time. If you live as though Christ were here already—that is, if you live faithfully and lovingly—you'll always be ready. Live as children of the light. Gird yourselves with faith and love, and be confident in the salvation you have been given. Encourage one another. Build up one another. I saw a picture in a Christian gift store. It was a delightful portrayal of an Irish proverb—"Dance like no one's looking, sing like no one's listening, and live each day as if it were your last." Live faithfully, in other words. Live trustingly in the grace of God. And climb into the wheelbarrow, ready to be pushed across Niagara Falls, if the one pushing the wheelbarrow is Jesus Christ. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon

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