

Confidence and Courage
Twenty Third Sunday After Pentecost
November 16, 2014
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Texts: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
 Matthew 25:14-30

Last week some of what Pastor Gordon shared with us were words that we are to encourage one another. We are to witness to and participate in the kingdom of heaven now, and to encourage one another with the Good News of God's promises. Now, I'm not going to stand here and reiterate his words for you again this morning, as worthwhile and tempting as that might be. And it is also a little tempting to say, "Gordon, you've said all that needs to be said!" Or even, "That's all folks!" But let's acknowledge for a moment that it is all too easy to forget even the most amazing things, and that it can be challenging to hold onto good news or to hear, *really* hear, words of encouragement in the midst of the brokenness of the world, and in our own lives. All that to say, I think its ok for us to talk again about encouragement and fear this morning. We'll talk about these things in a little bit of a different way, yes, yet hopefully we'll be reminded of the confidence and courage we can have in living each and every day.

Let's start by looking to this morning's passage from Matthew. It is among a number of parables that Jesus gives to describe the kingdom of heaven, which the author of this gospel has pointed out to us is here and now. But before we get into that, let's look at some of the players in this parable, and to the action of the story. A man has entrusted his property to a few of his slaves while he goes away on a journey. This seems logical; we might do something like this when we go on an extended trip, though

perhaps entrusting our “*property and possessions*” to our “*slaves*” might be too severe of language when we talk about our family and friends! Going on with the parable, kids might be entrusted to the closest of kin (who have much experience raising their own children and have looked after these children on countless occasions), the beloved dog to a good and responsible friend (who just so happens to own and operate the town’s premiere dog grooming and training facilities), and the goldfish perhaps to the seemingly friendly (yet ever so busy) next door neighbor. Each given according to their ability.

Upon returning from the trip, one finds that the kids had a wonderful time, are eager to write thank you notes, are already ahead on homework, and have agreed to make dinner (including doing the dishes)! And the dog can now sit, stay, *and* roll over! And the goldfish is, well, still a goldfish that hasn’t moved from the spot on the counter where it was placed before the trip.

Ok, ok, I’ve carried on with my “re-parable-ization,” if you will, long enough, and yes my metaphor falls short, but I think you get the idea. One thing I wanted to do here by changing up the language from talent to living beings is to put the value of a talent in perspective. A single talent was a large sum of money. When I was trying to find out exactly how much this might be to put it in perspective, I came across some varying numbers, but one thing is for sure: even just a single talent was worth the equivalent of a number of years’ worth of wages. Wages that would equate to someone’s livelihood, which is much harder to put a price tag on than just a sum of money.

With that in the back of our minds, let's dissect some of what could be behind the conversation between the third slave and the master: Master, I knew that you were harsh; so I was afraid; have what is yours.

Or perhaps my retelling of the parable might sound like: I'm not sure that I think you're a very good or kind neighbor. I was afraid to move the goldfish for fear something bad would happen to it, and I would be further indebted to you. So I just continued on with my own business, not wanting to get caught up in yours.

I wonder, though, if some of the thoughts for this third one could have been something like this: I fear you for I do not understand you and what you do. I was so scared, that I did not want to do anything to disappoint you. What is even more terrifying to me is that you gave to others differently than how you gave to me; and so I thought you didn't trust me or what I can do. I second guessed my abilities and thus did nothing.

How easy is it to look around at others, to see what they have, what they can do, what their lives look like, or what their faith looks like and to have our own faith or peace of mind shaken? When we cannot see or understand the mind of God, and are too overwhelmed by the brokenness of the world to feel like we can do anything about it? When it seems like we are left with little, or that we might be beyond the love of God because of whatever reason we might imagine?

But friends, this is what we must be reminded of and encourage one another through: that the Lord our God is interested in, invested in, and cares for every single one of God's people. What faith looks like and how we are called to live might vary from person to person, but no matter how grand or mundane that call might seem, or how much or how little we understand, we are able to find comfort in confidently knowing that we are

loved by God. We don't have to live in fear like the third slave. We can live out each day knowing that God has invited us into life in the kingdom of heaven.

But how? How do we take this confidence we have in knowing that we are loved by God, and that God will work in and through us, into the very real brokenness of our everyday lives? Isn't it so easy to be paralyzed by fear, to be so scared to think or do something wrong, that we don't do anything at all? It's wonderful and necessary to hear the comforting words that God invites all people into a life of love within God's kingdom, but actively doing something about it, letting that love transform our lives, and sharing that love with others? It certainly sounds risky and intimidating to me. Can't we just let other people be the leaders and doers, so that we can just kick back and relax in the background where we know what to expect? I mean you can't do anything wrong if you don't do anything at all, right?

Well, while we all might not be called to be leaders, we are called to *actively* participate in God's kingdom. This active participation may call us a bit out of our comfort zone at times, and yes it can seem intimidating. So how can we step forward from just being confident into action?

The key is: with courage; courage that does not come from us alone, but from God; courage that is wrapped up in a breastplate of faith and love, and that lines a helmet of the hope of salvation.

These images of armor come from our epistle lesson for today. The pieces alluded to here, a breastplate and helmet, are two parts of a full suit of armor. The armor that we find described in the Bible is not one that is full of spikes, and arrows, and spears. It does not include offensive or destructive weaponry, but rather the imagery painted for us is one of

protective armor. Our primary defense against whatever may tempt us away from a life in Christ, a life of full participation in the kingdom of heaven, is rooted in faith, love, and hope. These are the very gifts that are given to us by God. These are gifts given so that we may courageously live the lives we are called to live. God does not send us out from Himself exposed and defenseless, but extends love to us, gives us faith, and sustains us through the hope we have in salvation.

Furthermore, we can have courage, not because of *our* ability to conquer the sin and brokenness of the world, but knowing that through Christ the power of sin and death has been overcome! The lack of offensive weapons in the imagery of armor is a comfort for us. God does not demand that we conquer and destroy. God does not send us to judge and condemn. We are invited and called to participate in and witness to the kingdom of God. And our response is through confidently and courageously doing so each and every day in gratitude to God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Our confidence and courage come first from God, but we are not called alone. The invitation to participate in the kingdom is not just for you or for me, but for all of us together, for all of God's people together. The way we are called to participate in the kingdom may be different, but we can affirm the gifts and service of our fellow brothers and sisters. We can have confidence in ourselves and in one another because we know that God has equipped us each in unique ways. So hear again these words from the apostle Paul, "encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing."

Amen.