

## **A RAM IN THE BUSH**

**1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-7; MATTHEW 25:1-14**

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A friend of mine received a t-shirt from his adult children. It says on the front, “What if the hokey-pokey is not what it’s all about?”

The t-shirt gets a chuckle because it matches a very serious question – what is life about? – with a very silly answer – the hokey-pokey.

If I could draw, I would sketch a cartoon picturing a prophet of doom, wearing sackcloth and ashes, walking a city street, holding a sign saying, “What if the hokey-pokey is not what it’s all about?” And I would send that cartoon to the *New Yorker*.

Let me get more serious. To the age-old question, “what is it all about?” both of today’s stories answer, “faith.” It is about faith not fear says Paul to the Thessalonians.

Life is about faith not fear, says Matthew to followers of Jesus in Jerusalem.

We’ve been talking over these weeks about stewardship. Three weeks ago, we talked about the shoulders we stand on. Those leaders and congregations before us who served with vision and courage in their time and brought us to the present moment. Last week we talked about how God uses struggle and crisis to shape us and to deepen our commitment to one another and to God.

Today’s message? The stewardship of life is grounded in faith. When I say stewardship of life I don’t mean what you pledge each year or put in the offering plate Sunday. I mean how you spend your life, each waking second, every sleeping moment. I mean every ounce of energy you give to any task large or small. And yes, your money too.

You could make a case that life is not about faith. Life is about fear. Those demons of heart and mind that are behind and beneath just about anything we do.

Jealousy, for example. It is fear of the loss of love. Why are people greedy and acquire as much as they can? It is a fear, a fear of insecurity. Why do children cheat at school? Fear of failure. Why does anybody tell a lie? Fear of punishment. There are some people who stay on the telephone all the time to make sure somebody is still out there. What are they afraid of? A moment alone?

Or just the fear of losing our energy and steam. The way we gradually slow down although most of us try to avoid the reality of that slowing. Like when you were a child and took a little flat rock and sailed it on the water and hit the water. Sometimes you could get one to skip five or six times if it was a good rock and you were strong. But I don’t care how many times it skips, when it slows down – is that what you are afraid of?

“When they say, ‘there is peace and security,’” Paul warns today, “then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape.” Fear of some apocalyptic end surfaces throughout human history and recently in our time with weapons of mass destruction and terrorism.

You can see how fear operates in the life of the one talent man in today's story from Matthew. Like Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, Matthew is talking in this parable about Jesus' anticipated return, someday. Before the master leaves he gives his servants talents to use as they choose until his return.

Matthew does not speculate about the specific details of life after Jesus' return. He directs our attention to the issues at hand. To the importance of being ready for that day whenever and however it comes. That day when our life is held against the scales of justice and love.

The first two servants seem to understand the importance of being ready. It affects the way they live and how they use their talents. What's the problem with the third? He is not dishonest, deceitful or fraudulent. He just buries his one talent. According to the custom of the day if the money was stolen while it was buried and not in your physical possession you were absolved of any liability.

What's so wrong playing it safe like that? What's so wrong with returning what you were given exactly as it was?

When I have preached on this text in the past someone usually comes up afterward and says, "that guy got a bum deal. He didn't hurt anybody. He didn't break any law. What's the problem?"

That's the beauty of a parable...a heavenly story with an earthly message. It grabs your attention; gives you a jolt like those Scandinavians who sit in a sauna then run outside and roll in the snow. What on earth, some people have asked, is the earthly message in this story? And if that is what heaven is about I'm not so sure I'm a candidate or that I even care. But sometimes we need a good jolt to the system to get us working properly again.

We are talking today about how the stewardship of life is grounded in faith.

When I meet with the confirmation class or our new members I always translate that word faith. I always tell them the Greek word for faith in the New Testament is the everyday, household word for trust.

If my son comes home after the curfew and tells me he had a flat tire either I trust that he is telling me the truth or not. When the Bible says that all things work together for good or that God will not test us beyond our ability and strength either we trust this to be true or we don't.

What gets in the way of trust, what is the opposite of trust is fear. I am afraid my son isn't truthful, that he was cavorting around. I am afraid the Bible is filled with pious platitudes and that I'll lose at the game of life.

Jesus could just look at people and he could see if they were living by trust or by fear.

The rich young ruler he told to sell everything, give it to the poor and follow him was living by fear. The centurion who came to ask Jesus to heal his daughter who was miles away, just say the word Jesus and she will be healed; or the woman who knew if she just touched the hem of his garment she would be well.

Jesus could tell the ones who were trying at least to live by trust, by faith. He told them to keep it up. "Your faith has made you well," he said.

But maybe are you saying to yourself that's all fine but what about the punishment of the one talent man. What's the justification for throwing him into outer darkness?

The problem with fear is that it paralyzes your life. It leads to not using your gifts, to squandering or hiding your talent. Last Sunday after church I went to Pennsylvania to play an annual round of 27 holes of golf with three old friends. We have been doing this for the past 18 years. Veterans Day golf...the swan song of the golfing season, even though it was the first time two of us got out this year.

At any rate, I had enough good shots from the tee, from the fairway, on the green so that I think I'll continue to play the game. But I also had some terrible shots. One where I laid up to a big pond. The green was just sitting there on the other side saying, "place it right here if you can." But all that water was saying, "yeah, right, can't wait to get this sucker's ball." The last thing I remember hearing before I tried to hit the ball was the pond laughing. I was afraid of losing the ball. I hit the darn thing on a line drive right into the middle of the pond. Splash! "Ha, ha, ha" the pond taunted.

Now you can substitute anything you want for golf. You can substitute speaking in front of people or doing math or learning to use the computer. You can substitute your parenting or your marriage life, or career.

When we operate out of fear we get tight and constricted. We pull the club back too fast, lift our head, punch the ball. Sometimes you completely miss the ball. You look like a Tin Man out there.

I remember a college classmate. We were both taking a painting class. He produced these paintings that looked like Grandma Moses. The figures were primitive but they were made with bold strokes and wonderfully bold colors. The teacher loved my friend's courage, he said. He was painting like he wasn't afraid. He was putting it out there. Wasn't worried about making too many mistakes or not getting it right. The rest of us in the class painted like wusses. Careful, little, bland objects. We were paralyzed.

So when the master of those three slaves comes back and the first two produce their talents that had multiplied the master was pleased and said, "well done good and trustworthy slave, you have been trustworthy [read faithful] in a few things I will put you in charge of many things...enter into the joy of your master."

But when the one talent man came forward and had the same old talent to show he said, "master, I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here have what is yours."

You can substitute anything you want for that talent. You can substitute your marriage and parenting life, you can substitute your career, you can substitute anything you have, any relationship or object...because they all belong to God. God has blessed you with them and the question is how are you using them. Are you moving through life with trust or fear? Do you think God is a harsh God? Do you think if you lose control of your children or don't know where your significant other is every minute or don't keep your house spotless that something bad will happen?

Let me tell you that yes, sometimes I do think something bad will happen if I don't "get it right." And so there have been times when my parenting has looked like my golf swing at the edge of that pond or my marriage life has looked like one of my sophomore paintings...rigid, careful, detached, joyless. Fear can paralyze you.

And I think when that happens God is deeply saddened. When we pull back from life, when we let our fears dictate our actions and flummox everything up God is actually more sorrowful than angry.

I'll never forget when I was in New Haven going to Divinity School my cousin called. He lived outside of New York City and had season tickets to the Jets. He asked if I would like tickets to a Jets game. Gave me some dates, mailed the tickets, game day came.

It was a Sunday. The drive to Shea Stadium was a good 90 minutes. I'd have to leave early in the morning and get home early evening. I was worried taking a whole day away from my studies might get me in trouble. I couldn't afford that much time. So without telling him I just decided that day not to go to the game. Told the person who was supposed to go with me I had too much work to do.

What I didn't realize was my cousin's tickets were with a bunch of his friends. He called me that week to see what happened. I gave him some flimsy excuse about having too much to do. But I knew how disappointed he was. He never asked again if I wanted to use his tickets to a Jets game. I see the parable today as more descriptive than anything. When we squander the gift of life we end up with less, we experience God as distant, removed, disappointed and angry would not be off the mark either.

What I raise for us today is not just the question of how you're living your personal life – out of fear or trust, but also how are we living our congregational life. Our stewardship goal this year is \$800,000. A 45% increase. Bold, trusting, faithful to our vision.

The only way we will reach that goal is if each of us does our very best. And if many, many members increase their giving significantly. We simply have to get more people up to and over the \$1,000 per year mark. And those who are in the \$1,000 level to the two and three and four and five thousand levels and beyond.

The only way we can get to higher levels of giving, the only way we can stretch ourselves is by trusting...that if I make my church giving more important than some other things it'll be OK. I'll survive. God provides.

Years ago I asked Fred Davis, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Easton, PA with whom we had a sister church relationship, I asked Fred how his church did it all. Put up the senior apartments, built the youth center and gymnasium, expanded the sanctuary.

Fred, who is 5'6", 60 years old and a former Golden Glove boxing champion, smiled and said, "we make decisions around here trying to trust God like Abraham did with Isaac. When it looks for all the world like we couldn't or shouldn't do what God is calling us to do we do it anyway. And more often than not, like Abraham before he could sacrifice Isaac, we find a ram stuck in a bush.

That's living with trust even when your fears are all around you. The reward for that kind of living is a serenity and joy the world does not know. The stewardship of life is grounded in faith. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Fred B. Craddock, Cherry Log Sermons (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001) 31.