

Sermon for Sunday 15 November 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Judges 4:3-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

*“Problematic”*

Problems, problems.

After praying two weeks back for a peaceful Presidential election, and then giving thanks last Sunday for what appeared to be a successfully completed one, we went on through what seems to be confirmation of all our prayers, accepting one day at a time the relative calm that surrounds us.

But, as we all know, we're not out of the woods in many ways ...so the word “problematic” not only covers the scriptures for today, but the life we're living.

Let's stick to the Bible for a moment. The first lesson opens a window that's mostly closed in what we call the Old Testament, because it gives a woman, Deborah, not only prophetic gifts but the leadership in battle. Still, we must step lightly in our story-telling here, and say very plainly that the God we worship through Jesus Christ is not partial either to male superiority or to warfare. That's a word we must still repeat, all these many years after Jesus.

Psalm 123 is more accessible. No male-dominated imagery, no battle cries ... what a relief!

Paul is still more trustworthy, focusing on the reliability of God ... With just a little imagination, we can hear him “speaking to our condition,” as John Wesley would say. He gives me a permit, in the pulpit, to insist we not let the virus, or President Trump's behavior of the moment, or our less-than-general commitment to mask-wearing or staying at home over the holidays, or all the other things we're confronting, overwhelm us. This ancient scripture-speak translates right clearly into what we need to hear and say and pray over in this year of our Lord 2020. Plenty of room for facing our problems is provided here. Plenty of images we can use in our praying alone, and in worship together each Sunday.

The Spirit does come most alive, for me, this Sunday, in the Parable of the Talents, which Matthew has Jesus offering in these last days of his relative safety and freedom. It's likely he's talking with his disciples, rather than preaching to large groups, now. This is to-the-point talk, a beloved leader carefully selecting what to emphasize. Three slaves are given big sums to manage while their slave-holder master leaves for a long time. You know the story. We've just heard it again. It's about risk, and fear, and reward, and punishment. All that is quite precise, just like we try to say of this week's, and this season's, and this transition's, and this pandemic's demands on all of us. God is speaking to us directly through scripture here.

Problems. The Lord seems to think we know how to deal with them, seems to believe we're not paralyzed by our fear over each new report in the news. Has the conversation at recent family gatherings been coming through, Lord? Do you know what I'm dealing with among

those I'm closest to, related to? Which way am I to risk? The parable suits this week well: How can I be both brave and diplomatic at the same time? Politics is no fun here. I could even say democracy is dangerous now, as we've watched it be in so many other countries over the years, and thought we were superior and secure.

Do you know me? Do you know my family?

Is this isolation we're practicing these days ... or this reaching across the aisle we're urged to attempt... or whatever we work on in the midst of everything ... is this how it's done?

How deeply scripture comes alive when we allow it! It's not its literal details that solve our problems, it's the regular discipline of listening to its long-treasured examples and then being quiet until a thought comes for our circumstances. It's that...atmosphere that heals, day after day, moment by moment, accepting the silence. Quiet, healing energy comes to us from the universe in this discipline of prayer and scripture-reading. God is everywhere. Nature is full of kindness when we dare to look at it that way.. We are part of nature, part of the creation God saw, and said it was good.

To sink into the love of God; to trust that my loving comes from you, and yours comes from me; to sense, again and again, that this is God, with no clear division between divine and human; to see some broken moment causing everything to stop, and to stand still...to be willing to leave it at that, until fresh insight comes, and not need to explain our trust, but just to practice it.

What if the biggest problem is also a window? Matthew makes Jesus harsh in the parable. Is that because @ that moment Christians where Matthew lived were terribly afraid? We know enough about addiction and illness of all kinds to believe some problems actually improve in the dark, the loss, the counseling that we ran from for so long.

I guess I needn't say more than you can believe about this season. One of the hardest things in testifying to God's love is trusting the other person to finish the idea. We are all so special, feeling good and bad in so many ways ... In Harry Emerson Fosdick's brave phrase, "It's a Great Time to Be Alive." Thank God we have the friends we have, and the comfort, and the courage and wisdom. When does speaking turn into listening? When do problems start filling out into work we can do, gentleness we can manage, in the midst of everything?

Problems, problems.

That's your specialty, Lord Jesus. You bring us the truth, and give us patience to work just on the side of it, the part that seems right for us

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

