

Faithfulness

One of the cardinal rules of preaching is to avoid telling everyone what one is not going to do. What's the point of taking time to do that? Well, I'm going to break that rule today and tell you right from the start that I'm not going to say much about the Gospel lesson. Three years ago I preached on this Gospel and when I reread that earlier sermon I thought, I don't think I could say anything more or better than I did then. The thought did cross my mind to use it again, but you deserve better than that. I also remembered a story my uncle Henry once told me. For many years he was a pastor at a big Lutheran Church near Harvard Square, doing three services every Sunday. He told me he preached a different sermon at each service every week. When he was in his seventies, he lamented that for the first time in his life he had to repeat a sermon. That's a remarkable record I will never achieve.

So if not a sermon on the dishonest manager, what then? How about the first letter to Timothy? "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." We do pray for our President and those in high positions every week, and have done so no matter who the President is, but if I go down this road very far I'm sure to delight half of you and irritate the other half. And are we really living a quiet and peaceable life in this country? I suppose those who are well-off financially can insulate themselves from a lot of unpleasantness, but they are still subject to the generalized anxiety that permeates our culture.

It's not surprising to find such sentiments in the letter to Timothy. It has a very conventional view of society, and is so different from other letters of Paul in thought and language than many scholars think he didn't really write it. It was perfectly acceptable in those times to attribute authorship to a well-known figure, especially if one extended that person's ideas to new situations. That occurs elsewhere in the Bible and was not considered the least bit unethical.

Much of the first letter to Timothy is so conventional and so jarring to modern ears that the lectionary skips from the second chapter today to the sixth chapter next week. We'll miss such gems as women being told to dress modestly with no gold or pearls. They are to learn in silence in full submission and not to teach or have authority over a man. (And this letter is attributed to the same person who said in his authentic letter to the Galatians that there is no male or female because all are one in Christ Jesus!) We'll also miss the qualifications of bishops and deacons. Among other things, they are to be temperate, not a drunkard, nor lovers of money. Timothy is also exhorted to honor widows who are really widows – what does *that* mean?

It's easy to make fun of something written at another time for another culture. On the other hand, there are those whose belief in biblical inerrancy leads them to say that such things are written for all time and all cultures, and are not at all contingent. Those are *not* the churches where my wife, Raisin, would be a priest and the Rector of her own church.

Yet this letter does have great wisdom. I believe that God *does* desire everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. That is God's *desire*. As I've said before, the reality of free will is that we can thwart God's desire by refusing to follow God, and the awful thing is that God will allow us to do that. I also believe that there is one mediator between God and

humankind, Christ Jesus. As Anglican Catholics we can pray to the saints and to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but as Anglican Protestants we do not have to pray *through* them to reach Jesus. Jesus is our sole mediator with God.

God's desire is for our faithfulness, keeping our part of the bargain God has made with us in giving us all that we have. The history of Israel, and even within Paul's churches, is one of *unfaithfulness*. In the Old Testament God's response is often portrayed as wrath, anger at the people who turned away. That made sense to them, and was how they explained the disasters that came upon them, especially the great disaster of the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. That's the context out of which Jeremiah speaks, his great grief at the desolation of Jerusalem. It's also the context of Psalm 79, where the psalmist asks God to turn his wrath on the enemy.

That's not usually the spirit of the New Testament, however, with the sole exception of the Book of Revelation, written in the context of Roman persecution. Instead, the longing of God for repentance becomes much more evident. Jesus wanted to gather the inhabitants of Jerusalem like a hen gathers her brood under her wings. The cross is often spoken of as the means by which all will be drawn to God.

Even the dishonest manager is faithful. True, he's faithful to saving his own skin, but he's commended even for that. "If you haven't been faithful with the dishonest wealth," Jesus says, "who will entrust to you the true riches?" Being faithful is more important than wealth, because faithfulness is from God, and you cannot serve God and wealth.

So in spite of my initial disclaimer, I see that I'm talking about the dishonest manager. Who would think that he would be an example of faithfulness? Yet he is. And we faithfully pray for the President each week, as we always have. Those who ground their teeth at the mention of the previous President now watch others grind their teeth over the current one.

Most of all, many of us faithfully come here, week after week, to praise God and ask for forgiveness and look for the strength and courage and hope to get through another week. That's what faithfulness looks like. And I, for one, thank God that you *are* here, because each one of you gives hope to those around you. God *is* faithful. Can we be anything less?

[Pentecost 15: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1; Psalm 79:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-7; Luke 16:1-13.]