

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's in-person and on-line
Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

*Therefore encourage one another and build up each other,
as indeed you are doing.*

At one time in my life I spent a lot of time on canoe trips as a trip-leader. Before I was a trip-leader, though, I was a leader-in-training, watching and learning how to lead others. And it's an experience of watching someone else lead a trip, while I was learning how to lead, that's in my mind as I read both Thessalonians and the parable from Matthew this week.

Sadly it's a story about a less-than-stellar leader, a leader that was something of a harsh man, irritable and quick to anger. He was paired in a canoe with John, a friend of mine who was in leadership training with me. The harsh leader tended to take the stern, and would put John in the front, in the bow seat. And there was this one time when the two of them were coming on shore, but the landing was rocky and a bit uneven. As a result John was tentative in setting his foot on the shore, caught in a lengthy moment of indecision, putting his foot out of the boat, bringing his foot back into the boat, putting his foot back out of the boat again ... just having a hard time negotiating an unsteady boat.

And as John tried to negotiate that landing, the harsh leader spent his time yelling from the stern: "WOULD YOU JUST HURRY UP AND MAKE A DECISION ALREADY?!"

This was not what you would call a "confidence building experience" for John. In fact because the "rocky landing indecision incident" wasn't isolated—there were other similar experiences for him—I watched John shrink a bit, lose his confidence, and begin to *expect* being treated with harshness.

Now John turned out alright. But it's not hard to imagine, either, that without some intervention and healing, John would have begun to internalize some of that fear even after that harsh leader was long-gone. That John might've begun to act like every rocky landing, no matter who was in the stern, should be met with fear and anxiety.

The reason this story comes to mind as I read the parable, is that I recognise John in that third servant—the servant that was *afraid*. The third servant that hides what his master had given him. I recognize John in the

reason the servant gives for his fear: “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid.” Here is a servant who was unable to imagine a world where risk was ok. Here is a servant who could only see reasons to live in fear. And so he lived in fear and futile attempts at safety.

In one of those literary ironies you get in parables, it turns out the master isn't actually harsh at all until the servant says the property owner is harsh; in fact, what we see of the master until that point is just the opposite. The master till that point is a guy who will just straight up give his stuff away, for no good reason, and certainly not because any of those servants deserved anything. The parable begins with straight up generosity, a guy just giving his stuff away, someone who *trusts*.

And later when the master returns, he's *still* not a harsh man. The first two servants—trusting in the master's generosity and goodness—have taken a *risk*, and the result of their fearless risk-taking is that they are led into the *joy* of their master. Almost as though living a life of trust leads you into a fearless joy; and living in fear leads you into very harsh circumstances indeed.

Again, much like the parable last week, I would encourage a reading here that doesn't see the harsh treatment of the one fearful servant as the end of the story. I would encourage us to see the outer darkness as something temporary, purgative, and preparatory, and to imagine that the fearful servant would eventually enter into the joy of his master as well.

Because the *truth* here is that our Master and Lord *isn't* harsh, and if we've learned that our Master and Lord is harsh then we have been led into *untruth*.

I think Thessalonians helps here. The ending of our reading centres around questions: “Who do you think God is?” “What do you think God has accomplished?” “What is God's hope for us?” And as that letter summarises God's character, God's work in Christ, and God's hope—it begins by saying “God has destined us *not* for wrath.” Instead, as Paul continues, God has destined us for “salvation through our Lord Jesus

Christ.” God in Christ has destined us for *life*, life in the Christ “who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may *live* with him.”

And I really love the ending of this portion of Thessalonians: “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” I love it because Paul must have his tongue at least slightly planted in his cheek. When you’ve got teenagers in the house, you don’t say “sweetheart I’m so glad you’re doing such a good job of keeping your room clean,” if you didn’t think that this sudden habit of making the bed every day might not stick.

So I imagine it’s likely that Paul sees a glimmer of hope, some small beginning to the Thessalonian’s mutual encouragement, more than he might see a full-blown community of consistent care. And so he encourages encouragement: please do, says Paul, “encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

But it’s the “therefore” that gives the heart of things away. “*Therefore* encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” First be *confident* in the salvation God was wrought for us in Christ, first be *sure* in the knowledge that Christ has died so that we might live, first *know* that God is not that bad canoe trip leader, traumatizing impressionable young canoeists, teaching us to be afraid.

This Master is one who is so generous, gracious, and good that we can confidently live lives of real risk. Our Master is one who “has destined us *not* for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may *live* with him.”

And because these things are *true*: “*Therefore* encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.” Because if God would be so good and gentle to us, so too would we be good and gentle with one other, not being harsh, but encouraging, building up one another, confident as we are that God has already been good and gracious towards us.

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