

Sunday August 7th, 2022
Pentecost 12

PRAYER: God of mercy, we praise you for the hunger you place in our hearts, the longing to find our lives hallowed and adorned by grace; a yearning that impels us to seek, ask, and knock until we find our heart's true desire. O God, you hear our prayers of longing, born of the hunger for all that is holy. We praise you for steadfast love, for like a friend at midnight, you will rise to answer us when we call. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: James, the brother of Jesus, reminds us that even the very act of giving and generosity are only made possible by the grace of God, when he wrote, "Every generous gift of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." (James 1:17)

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, who confronts us with hopeful tomorrows, despite our rebellious yesterdays, we approach you in gratitude. We put ourselves in your hands, though our sins are like scarlet, assured that you can take all this wrong with us and make it right, that you can take all that is good about us and make it better.

We do not sing about "amazing grace" simply because a hymn writer has composed the lines. We sing about it because your grace at work in our life has never ceased to amaze us. We marvel at its power to transplant and to transform. Your grace turned Abraham and Sarah from comfortable residents of a reputable city into tent-dwelling but happy nomads; your grace turned Moses from a stammering youth into an eloquent liberator; your grace turned Ruth from an obscure widow into a determined heroine; your grace turned Isaiah from a preacher of judgment into a proclaimer of forgiveness; your grace turned Mary from a scorned refugee into a keeper of divine secrets; your grace turned Saul, a fierce persecutor of Christians, into Paul, a forceful proclaimer of Christian faith.

Your grace at work in human life is no less amazing today. "The old, old story" can be repeated, if only we could transcend our past: a past when we were less careful about the places we frequented; less careful about the power we wielded; less scrupulous about the money we spent; less concerned about the practices we encouraged. O Lord, release us from our past that we might experience the freedom for which Christ set us free, and serve one another in love.

We do not pray for ourselves alone. We pray for all whose tomorrows are overcast with the shadows of their yesterdays. Blot out their painful memories, and deliver us from the temptation to rekindle their pain. Let us remember that you do not appoint us either as judges over them or as keepers of their conscience. You do appoint us to open the door when they knock, that they might come in and sup with you and you with them.

We thank you, dear Lord, that your amazing grace still abounds, and that, just as you made our ancestors its channel for us, you make us its channel for others. If there be in us any obstacle to its flow, we pray that you will not let it remain. Remove it far from us, so that in the days to come, when your people sing, "Amazing Grace," they will praise you-not as the God of the past but as the God of the present; not as the God who was but as the God who is-is now, and evermore shall be.

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Luke 12:32-40

“Ready or Not”

It was an amazing day several years ago. The sun was blazing in the sky which was absolutely cloudless. How could I resist the urge to try once again to see if I could catch something a little more significant than the minnows I had been hauling in? After all, it was becoming somewhat embarrassing showing up each night at the lodge for supper, only to be the brunt of teasing and amusing comments about how my daughter, who had never fished before, was out fishing dozens of seasoned sportsmen and dear old dad.

So, I tried to see if any fish were biting in various places, but the only thing I seemed to catch was a dandy sun burn on my face from the water's reflection. I decided to try one last part of the interconnected lake system and on my first cast, wouldn't you know my luck hadn't changed one bit, and in fact I got a nasty snag on a rock or tree and ended up losing my lure.

I reeled in my now very limp fishing line and was about to put a new lure on when I looked up and a large power boat was approaching me. It pulled alongside and in big bold letters the boat advertised, “OPP”. There were two men in the boat; a wildlife conservation officer and a police officer. The conservation officer asked right away for my fishing license and my picture ID, which gratefully I had carried every day in my pocket while fishing.

Having satisfied the conservation officer, I thought they would move on, but I was wrong. The police officer then took a turn with me, commenting positively that I not only had a life jacket in the boat, I actually had it on. “Very smart, and the right thing to do”, he said. Man, was I grateful that I had taken the time to put the jacket on and put my licenses in the pocket.

These two fine men could now be on their way to catch unaware people who either forgot or refused to purchase a license, or take their life jackets with them. I was about to say “good day” to them, when the police officer said, “Now where is your boating safety kit?” “Safety kit? What safety kit? Nobody told me about a safety kit. My brother-in-law, (Who owned the resort I was staying at) didn't tell me about such a thing.” This, believe it or not, is what I told the officer.

He replied, “As the operator of this boat, it is your responsibility to carry the safety kit, and to know what is to be in it. I could give you a ticket today, but instead I will just give you a warning.” “Thank you”, I said, “I will return to the lodge right away and get this safety kit.” I shared my story with my brother-in-law, and soon word of my being stopped got around, and within minutes people began to parade by me with little orange safety kits, which were available to us at the camp store all the time, but none of us knew.

I can think of nothing more frustrating than making an effort to be prepared, and then discovering to our horror, that we have overlooked some critical element in our preparations.

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How often in life do we prepare for some event or experience only to ask ourselves, “Did I forget something? Am I truly ready?” Then perhaps we worry over any potential embarrassment we incur because we forgot something critical; like the woman who was preparing for an important dinner party, who fussed all day over every detail. Finally, when she was satisfied, she had everything under control; she invited her guest to sit at the table.

Taking a deep breath, she turned to her seven-year-old daughter and asked her to say the blessing over the meal. The little girl replied, “But mommy, I don’t know what to say.” Mom said, “Just say what mommy says when she talks to God.” Everyone bowed their heads and the little girl said, “Dear Lord, why did I ever decide to have this dinner party?”

Today’s Gospel lesson is all about being prepared or being ready. Being ready not for a fishing trip or a dinner party, but ready when Jesus shall return. In the form of three little parables, Jesus makes the urgent point regarding our essential need for readiness, using three different perspectives.

The first may be the perspective we are most familiar with, and the one perhaps we identify with the most. That is Jesus’ parable of being a servant who is called on to be watchful for the master’s return. In this little parable, the servant is urged to make ready and keep ready, everything the master might want or need after being away. In human terms we might think of food being ready, the bed being made, or the house kept clean.

There is a real sense in this little illustration that Jesus is stating the obvious. People in his day, and even today (think *Downton Abby*) have servants who are expected to do these things. If you are a servant you are expected to serve, by anticipating and preparing for your master’s or employer’s needs. That is what servants do, and all of us understand this; but we should, according to Jesus, understand something else.

A servant, who does not keep things in complete readiness for the master, would be negligent of their responsibilities, and unfit to serve the master. Jesus however, gives this little picture a bit of a new twist. Unlike when a human master returns, when the Son of Man returns, the roles of servant and master will be somewhat reversed, and the Master will invite his faithful servants to come and dine with him and he will serve them.

The second little parable is from the perspective of homeowner, who is ever vigilant for burglars who will try to break in and steal. Just like in the first parable when no one knows when the master might return, no one knows when a burglar might try and break in and steal. Jesus, states the obvious, by reminding us all that a burglar does not announce his arrival ahead of time.

There would be no need for companies like “*Alarm Force*”, if burglars simply sent us a note, email, or phone call letting us know when they will be attempting to break in and steal our possessions. A shrewd homeowner is therefore always vigilant, never letting down their guard.

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Listening to these first two parables, Peter contemplating over what he has just heard asks a profound question, “Lord, is this illustration just for us or for everyone?” In other words, is Jesus just talking to the twelve disciples or is he speaking to everyone? Do these warning parables apply to you and me, or just Peter and the gang? Can we, as some biblical commentators are apt to do, simply dismiss these parables as applicable to only a small group of people, like missionaries or pastors?

Jesus’ answer to Peter opens the third little parable which draws us all into the discussion. “I am talking to any faithful and sensible servant, to whom the master gives the responsibility of managing his household and feeding his family.” What then does it mean to manage God’s household and feed his family? I don’t think it is much of a stretch to see the work and ministry of God’s people as the focus of Jesus’ words. Are we caring for God’s family by managing the work he has called us to, and feeding the family with the word of God?

If when Jesus, our Master returns, will he find his servants have been faithful in their calling and duties, and will he therefore grant even more authority and opportunities to serve to them. Specifically, then, what shall we in this community of Norfolk present to our Lord when he comes? Are we ready, or have we been lax, and reckless, in abusing our privileged positions in God’s household?

This is very reminiscent of the parable of the talents in Luke 19, where at the end of the story, the servant with the most talents who was faithful, is given the talent from the one who was not faithful. The servants protested, “But master, that servant has enough already!” The king in the story replies, “Yes, but to those who use well what they are given, even more will be given. But from those who are unfaithful, even what they have will be taken away.

I am under great conviction when I read this passage, in thinking that perhaps we do not take Jesus very seriously in his warning. I fear we have become like the servant who thinks to him or herself that the Master won’t be back for some time, and so we can let our duties go and we can take liberties because the day of reckoning is still some time off. Further, we might slip into the danger of thinking we are the final authority in God’s household, and therefore believe it is our word that matters.

Thereby we end up oppressing other servants, making them feel inferior, or using them to do our work. It is a very fine line between being helpful, and being oppressive towards others who look to us for direction. I am a big fan of those delightful Christian videos called “Veggie Tales”. I encourage you, if you ever get the chance, to read the autobiography of the creator of “Veggie Tales”. It is quite a story.

Anyway, in the *Veggie Tale*, “King George and the Duck”, an adaptation of the story of David and Bathsheba, Larry the Cucumber stars as King George and Bob the Tomato is his faithful servant, Lewis. The privileges of royalty-kingdom expansion, castles, power, and treasures-do not appeal to King George. But King George loves to bathe with his rubber duck.

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Splishing and splashing, he sings an ode to his rubber duck called what else? “I Love my Duck.” One day while standing on the royal balcony in his purple robe and golden crown, King George peers through binoculars, and his eyes grow wide with desire. He spies something wonderful—a rubber duck. But it belongs to Billy, who happens to bathe with his rubber duck on his own balcony.

Billy’s rubber duck looks exactly like King George’s rubber duck. Nonetheless, the king covets it, exclaiming, “I want it!” Lewis reminds him that he already has a duck and that the other duck belongs to someone else. “Are you saying I shouldn’t have whatever I want?” asks the king. Lewis opens a large wardrobe overflowing with hundreds of identical rubber ducks and says, “If I could just jog your memory, you already have quite a few ducks.”

King George’s rationale is simple and represents so well the attitude many get with power and influence. King George shoots a condescending look at his unlearned servant Lewis and replies, “Those are yesterday’s ducks.”

If the story of David and Bathsheba and in turn “King George and the Duck”, can teach us anything, it is that with power comes great responsibility. Jesus is telling us that as managers or servants of his kingdom, we have been granted great authority and great power. Don’t believe me when I say you have authority and power? Read Matthew 16:13-20 and then decide.

In this passage Peter has just given his confession that Jesus is the Messiah, and Jesus declares that on this kind of faith the church shall be built. Then he says to Peter, and I believe it is not a stretch to say it applies to all Christ’s servants, “And I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. Whatever you lock on earth will be locked in heaven, and whatever you open on earth will be open in heaven.”

Sounds to me like servant language. These are words about authority and power; a power to influence both positively and negatively the eternal futures of people. In other words, have we been managing the household and feeding God’s family? How many people have we loosened from the bondage of that which they find themselves and how many, to borrow a phrase, “personal demons” have we helped bind up?

Maybe we have been so caught up in our own personal diversions that we have never even considered how we might loose and bind up in the service to our Master. I suspect that much of our own heartache in life is linked to a misdirected focus. Even in our spiritual journey we think primarily in terms of our own personal benefit, and not what might truly loose others from the bonds they bear.

Maybe we have forgotten where we are. There were two New Yorkers that were driving through Louisiana. As they were approaching the town of Natchitoches (Pronounced *nack-o-tish*), they started arguing about the pronunciation of the name of the town. They argued back and forth until they stopped for lunch.

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As they stood at the counter, one New Yorker asked the manager, “Before we order, could you please settle an argument for us? Would you please pronounce where we are...very slowly?” The manager with a confused look on his face leaned over the counter and said, “Burrrrrgerrrr-Kiiing.” This is not my church or your church. No matter how much money you have given or how many years you have served here, it is not your church and it never will be.

This is Christ’s church. It is his household and we are all but servants, entrusted with the responsibility and authority to manage what is here and the people who are a part of this community. What determines our value to the household of God is not our checkbook but rather whether we have truly been at work managing and feeding the household. Have our talents been used or been buried?

What will Jesus find among us when he returns? Will he find faith or will he find his servants unprepared? Let us pray that he finds us faithful.

BENEDICTION: As God sends us from this place, let us go forth in the faith that led Abraham and Sarah toward a new world. Let us, like them, refuse ever to turn back, that the day might soon dawn when our works of faith shall be as countless as the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand on the seashore. Amen.