

11-19 SermonA17Pentecost24

Ephesians 1:15-19

Matthew

25:14-30

The calendar says that Thanksgiving isn't until this coming Thursday. The interfaith community here in Olympia starts thanksgiving a little earlier. This afternoon, starting at 2 pm, Good Shepherd will be hosting the annual Interfaith Works community wide Thanksgiving Service. But, even before this afternoon's service St. Paul begins to set the thanksgiving mood. In his letter to the early church in Ephesus he says that his *prayerful thanksgiving* for them continues non-stop day and night. Paul goes on to say that he hopes they will understand, more and more, that they have been endowed with a share of the gracious, unmatched, brilliant, positive and powerful energy of God. Paul, being trained and schooled in Greek says it in a way that leaves a lot of us shaking our heads saying, "It's Greek to me." Breaking it done and distilling his thoughts I might say it like this, "Your trust in Jesus' ... trust in his proclamation and in his demonstration of God's unconditional love ... that trust, that belief, gives you real power! No kidding! It gives you real life giving power." Paul also points, quite clearly, to the purpose of that empowerment. It is nothing short of the unity and reconciliation of all creation.

I wonder if the early Christians in Ephesus had trouble believing Paul's words of encouragement. They had good reason to doubt them. The Roman world in which they lived operated under a well-defined, strict and legally enforced class system. That class structure was maintained by a patronage system in which those with significant power and status purchased more power and status by granting favors to people with less power and status. Early Christians didn't do business that way. They blurred and crossed political, social and economic class lines. They misbehaved according to the standard protocol of the day. And, their misbehavior made them unpopular with the

movers and the shakers in the Roman world. Of course, they paid a price for it.. Sometimes it cost them their living and sometimes it even cost them their lives. Yet, in the face of significant cultural marginalization and sometimes severe persecution they soldiered on. They kept right on believing in God's ability and desire to use their worldly weakness and vulnerability for something good. When the world looked down on them, they just kept looking up. They kept faith in the God whose deepest design and desire was to and still is break "down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility" between people (Ephesians 2:14) and put hostility to death (Ephesians 2:16)

Today, I wonder if any of us have trouble believing that St. Paul's encouraging words are true for us too ... if any of us have trouble believing that we have within us the very power of God for the reconciliation of the world. Do we have faith enough in God's limitless loving grace to risk personally investing the portion of grace we've been given, the talent of grace we've been given, when there are no guarantees about how it will come out and the ground beneath us feels shaky?

Do we risk our pride and invest our grace by adopting an authentically loving, gracious and understanding stance toward our Republican or Democratic neighbors. Do we do it even in the midst of our fears that *they* will be the ones to take America down the tubes? Do we take the risk or do we bury the talent of grace in the backyard and settle for surface civility?

Do we risk our long standing prejudices and invest our grace by engaging in genuine open-minded dialogue with our Muslim or better yet our White Supremacist neighbors. Do we dialogue just for the sake of getting a glimpse of where they are coming from and what their fears are? Or, do we stash the talent of grace we've been given in cookie jar and continue to look down from our lofty self-righteousness.

Do we risk our need to be right and invest our talent of grace by being willing to have tough conversations with family, friends and co-workers ... when there is no guarantee about the return on investment will be? Or, do we bury the talent of grace somewhere in the bottom of the sock drawer and shelter in place as much as we can?

God's steadfast mercy and forgiveness, God's boundless grace in Christ is truly our richest treasure ... without it we would be lost individually and corporately. It is the heart and soul of Christianity. Author and theologian Robert Farrar Capon points out that lack of faith, lack of trust in God's gift of grace ... and, an unwillingness to take a risk with the grace we've been giving is what Jesus condemns in today's parable. Capon gives a name to the risk adverse servant. He calls him Arthur. He imagines how Arthur goes to the recently returned businessman [AKA God in Christ] expecting to get a pat on the head for not losing any of the gift the grace that he's been given. Instead of a pat on the head, however, Arthur gets a verbal swat on the behind.

"Look Arthur," the businessman says, "I invited you into a fiduciary relationship with me" ... [a faith relationship with me.] "I didn't ask you to make money, I asked you to do business ... to exercise a little pragmatic trust that I meant you well and that I wouldn't mind if you took some risks with my gift of a lifetime. But, what did you do? You decided that you had to be more afraid *of me* than the risks. YOU decided. You played it safe because of some imaginary fear. And so now, instead of having gotten yourself a nice new life as mayor of at least a small city, you have only the crummy little excuse for the life you started with. As a matter of fact, Arthur, you haven't even got that anymore, because you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to take what I gave you and just for fun [to show the outrageousness of grace] I'm going to give it to that other guy over there who already has more grace than he knows what to do with. And, you know *why* I'm going to do that? *First of all* to

remind everybody that when I give you a gift [when I give grace & forgiveness], *I expect you to do business with it*, to keep it moving [to forgive others as you are forgiven] not just to keep it to yourself in some damned napkin [some low risk spiritual life in which you neither sin much nor love much.] *And second*, I'm going to give your gift to him to show everybody that I never really cared about the results anyway ... the gift of grace is not a reward for hard work or good behavior; it is a lark, a joke, a hilariously inequitable largesse: it is, in a word, a GIFT. Don't you see Arthur? It's all a game. All that matters at all is that you play, not that you play well or play badly. You could have earned a million with the money [with the grace] I gave you or you could have earned two cents. You could even have blown it on the horses for all I care: at least you would have been a gambler after my own heart.<sup>1</sup>

As I read Capon's words this week I found myself reflecting back on the times in my life when I've gambled on grace ... and on the times when I haven't. I've thought about the times when I've done business with the hilarious forgiveness and scandalous grace that God has given me ... and on the times when I haven't. I've thought about the times I've trusted the largesse of God's grace enough to extend it to others and to myself (which is often the hardest)... and I've thought about the times when I haven't. I don't regret any of the times I've gambled on grace ... any of the times I've done business. I only regret the times when I've played it "safe" and refused to do business. I only regret the times when I haven't been a gambler after God's own heart.

We have power you know ... real power ... power to tear down walls ... little thin walls and big thick ones. All it takes to put that power into action is a little faith. AMEN

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgement*. WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1989.