

What Image of God Do You See?

The title of this sermon raises a basic question for every Christian. When you read scripture, what image of God do you see? I think for most of us, the answer is usually given quickly and is found tied up neatly in the name we give the first four books of our New Testament...we call them the Gospels...which literally means Good News. And we proclaim that we are disciples of Jesus of Nazareth who proclaimed the good news of that the kingdom of God was near. This good news that Jesus brought was announced in Nazareth as he read from the Isaiah scroll and involved the bringing of justice, the release of the captive, feeding of the hungry, clothing of the naked and a general upsetting of the order of the day. This good news he brought led to his being crucified because it called for the upsetting of that order. The texts we are reading these last weeks just before we end this liturgical year with the proclamation of the kingship of Christ contain some of the last messages Jesus gave to his disciples before his arrest. Last week's parable was prefaced with the phrase "Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this..." as Jesus went on to describe a scenario of a bridegroom being delayed by negotiations causing some delay in the start of the wedding celebration. Some bridesmaids came prepared; some didn't. The message seemed to be directed for those waiting on Christ's return to be prepared for a wait and remain vigilant. The parable this morning begins immediately after the conclusion of that one with this verse: "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." Just because it immediately begins, we usually assume that this is also referring to Jesus' leaving and his later return. The parable is then about stewardship of the gifts we have been given. The man has three slaves to whom he entrusts his property...and not in equal amounts. He has determined that they have different abilities. To the one he feels most able, he gives the most. This individual doubles that. The next slave is given less, but he also doubles that. When the man comes back after a long time, he settles his accounts with the slaves. These results of the first two which doubled what he entrusted to them pleased him; they received the same praise. But then we come to that last slave, the one that the master did not value very highly to begin with. He only entrusted him with one talent. When the accounting time came, the slave returned that one talent to his master. He was not dishonest, and returned all that he had gotten but that brought forth punishment severe. It is when we come to this portion of the parable that we become uncomfortable with the concept that this is a description of how things might be in the kingdom of God. It surely wasn't good news for that slave. And that slave's actions were based on his image of his master. "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, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." And it seems that this slave's image of his master was well-founded. "His master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten talents.'" Of course, it doesn't end there as this "worthless slave is to be thrown into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Now we don't know anything about how the first two successful slaves felt about their master; if they had a different perception of him for some reason. We only know they accepted the talents and went out and doubled them. Whether this was done out of love

and respect, or out of fear...the narrative does not address. Did they anticipate success would lead to being welcomed into the “joy of the master”? Or were they just naturally more able to be risk takers? The narrative does not address or hint at any of these possibilities or questions. We only get to see the feelings of the one slave, the one who is fearful, who is unwilling to take a risk and this displeases his master and receives the dire punishment of outer darkness.

Throughout our Scriptures there are many passages, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, where the anger and wrath of God are described. Throughout the history of humankind, various themes within scripture have been lifted up and given more weight and importance. These themes have strongly influenced the image—the lens—through which they have viewed God. Although, I think like most of the parable that Jesus told, there are many messages within them, it is important to remember that this one does NOT begin by telling us it is a metaphor for God or how things are within God’s reign. In many of the description Jesus has given us, the images are those of a good shepherd, or a prodigal sower. That is not the image that is governing this third slave, and it seems that this may be a case of fulfilled expectations. It seems that his expectations of his master have led his master to react in exactly that way...the master even repeats exactly the words the slave used. Within this parable there may be a lesson for us that speaks profoundly to our current situation. I think that each of us has a fairly clear, if often unspoken, expectation of God that shapes our experience of God. In other words, we each carry have in our mind this picture of God and our experience of God rarely strays vary far from that picture. For some God is loving and kind, like a benevolent grandparent. For others, God is stern and judgmental. For some God is protective. For some God is always on the verge of anger. For some God is patient and long-suffering, while for others God is impatient and dour. Each of these images can be found somewhere within scripture. These pictures shape not just how we think about God, but how we actually experience so many events in our day-to-day life that we connect—often unconsciously—to God and to our life of faith. If our image of God is the that God is full of grace and mercy, slow to anger and eager to forgive, and our call is to follow the teachings of Jesus, then we have work to do in the world around us. The news we have to share is good news indeed. Verse 29 of this parable seems very troubling in this setting as it comes from the mouth of the master: “For to all who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” Yet in Matthew 13: 12-13, this is Jesus’ response to the disciples when they asked him the purpose of the parable he told: “For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak in parables is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” Perhaps the “talents” in this narrative represent the gift of perception, of wisdom, of understanding the presence and will of Jesus. Those who recognize the Messiah and follow and learn more about the true image of God, about who God is and what God requires of us. Those who perceive rightly the character of God and act accordingly

will in turn gain more wisdom—will draw closer to God. It is in the practice of our faith that our faith deepens and grows. In turn, when we fail to exercise it, it atrophies and is diminished. A life of faith requires taking risks for the sake of the gospel. It demands of us enough trust to let go of our talents, our gifts, our resources so that they are used in service to God who entrusted them to us. Such risk-taking grows from trust in the God who has made us stewards and cannot be undertaken when we are afraid. Fear engenders scarcity and self-protection. Fear makes for fight or flight, not for welcome and acceptance. In the climate around us today, we are awash in fear, demonstrating that trust does not come easily. The temptation to bury our talents grows with each threat and uncertainty. Those of us who follow Christ are called upon to encourage each other and build up one another so as to be able to take the risks that faith requires...to speak and step into the breach between and be repairers of it...we must prayerfully take risks in faith trusting the One who calls and equips us with the talents necessary for the task which is to witness to the image of God brought to us by Jesus...the One who so loves us all that he came and dwelled among us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.