



Deering Community Church

Pastor: Barbara Luckett Currie

CATCH THE FIRE

Sermon for 11-13-11

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matt. 25:14-30

What a difficult gospel lesson for today! This is the second of three parables in a row that Jesus told to his disciples. The previous “Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids” Jesus is urging his listeners to be watchful and not distracted by selfish pursuits, but to focus on those things that really matter. Parables are stories with many layers, or perhaps we could say many facets of meaning. All of these stories can be heard in different settings in different ways.

When I preached on this gospel three years ago, I thought of it as a stewardship sermon. The traditional interpretation of this parable emphasizes the importance of investing our gifts so they may multiply, bear fruit. The talents that are described are huge sums of money, multimillions of dollars, more than most of us today and certainly in that day would ever see. The Master, who is usually seen as God, has given each of his slaves a certain number of Talents and then goes away. The first two invest the talents and greatly increase the Master’s wealth; the third slave buries the Talent given to him. When the Master returns, the fruitful slaves are praised and the one who buried his talent was chastised severely and even thrown into the “outer darkness”. The moral of the story would be that God has given us all talents and money and we are to multiply those gifts and return them back to God.

The last time around I chose an alternative interpretation where Jesus is talking to his beloved disciples very close to the time they are to be parted by Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus has already told them many stories about how much God loves them and about how the kingdom of heaven is big enough for all. I saw the parable as Jesus trying to give his disciples courage to do the right thing and to share this amazing good news of God’s love. As they shared others would also share and there would be much abundance in the harvest of people praising God and following Jesus’ teachings. This interpretation sees the third slave as one so fearful of what lies ahead that he’s paralyzed; he does not live his life fully because of his fears.

Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians, describes Jesus’ followers as having a lot of fear. Paul and most Christians had the belief in that time that the day of the Lord, the end of the world, or some would say the second coming of



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Christ, would happen unannounced and everyone needed to be ready, be awake. None of us like to be faced with the unknown. I think Paul was saying that whatever happens, our life and our world is in God's hands and will unfold in God's way. In the meantime we need to encourage each other to not be afraid as whatever happens we will be alive in Christ.

The interpretation I want to share with you today comes from a justice perspective, and I am giving it the title of "Catch the Fire." In this explanation, the Master is not God but exactly who he is described, a rich, ruthless, money-hungry master. Here we have Jesus confronting greed. In those days a legal interest rate was about 12 percent so a 100 percent return on one's investments would be outrageous. It would be obvious to Jesus' followers that this type of return could only be gained through dishonesty and unjust practices. The first two slaves were following in their masters footsteps. Here the third slave would be the hero for not exploiting others for his or the master's gain. He was following the advice of the rabbis that if you receive money from someone for safekeeping, you were to bury it in a safe place so that you could return it without loss.

In our modern world we often place great value on the person who can garner great profits from financial investments, yet we today are very much aware of the dishonesty of many banks and Wall Street firms. As Christians we are called to question how money is used in our economic and political system to harm or hurt God's world and God's family. Greed is a sin and in the end how we earn, invest, spend and give our money may be the most obvious indicators of how we love or do not love God and our neighbors.(repeat)

According to one of my resources¹, when Matthew wrote his gospel he wasn't talking about risk of losing money but "the risk of the public expression of the gospel, whether they would keep it safely tucked away in a secure context or let it loose in the broader world among the nations." For his followers, it was about the risk of discipleship, with its very real dangers. So "this is stewardship beyond money: a stewardship of the gospel itself."²

¹ Charles Cousar, Texts for Preaching, Year A.

² Kate Huey, SAMUEL. UCC.org



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I come back to my mantra of what church is all about: transforming lives, both individual lives and the life of the church. Let me ask you a couple of questions: do you bury your faith, your relationship with God, or at least partially hide it away in day-to-day living? Do you take out your faith out only in times of crisis and need? Or is your whole life transformed by your faith as you listen for and respond to the Still Speaking God?

Let me close by recalling for you a story about one of the Desert Fathers from the early days of Christianity. In those days people went into the wilderness to live with an ascetic life, very few material comforts but great spiritual riches. "One day a young monk came to Abba Joseph and asked him what more he could do, since he was already doing some fasting, and some praying, and some work, mostly weaving baskets. The holy man responded, the story goes, by raising his hands, and fire shot out from his fingers as he responded to the young man with this great challenge: "Why not become totally fire?"³

Does this describe the faith of our church, totally on fire? Or is our faith more about safety and security? How much risk taking do we do? Do we talk to non-Christians about our faith? Do we invite them to come to church with us? Are we open to hearing God's voice? Are we willing to let this wonderful gospel lose in the world through our words and deeds?

As we prepare our self for Communion I ask you to reflect on what it would mean for you to catch the fire of the Holy Spirit? What more might you do to be a blessing to others? I'd love to hear from you. God bless you and ignite the Spirit inside of you.

Amen and amen.

³ Ibid.