

November 13 A 2011 "Truth in Story"

I love looking out my office window.

The world unfolds before me.

The kingdom of God can be seen from my window.

This week, my eyes were drawn to a squirrel that was running on the telephone line along the creek.

It made it a full length between polls.

Whenever it was out of balance, it would throw its tail in the other direction and regain balance.

When it reached a poll, it would climb around it and continue on its journey.

I watched it run four sections of wire and three poles to reach the Methodist church.

It hung around there for a while, then I watched it make the same journey back.

So what did I learn about this squirrel, and what are the implications for us?

First, this was a high-tech squirrel.

By using the technology, it could get to the next block in an efficient, safe way.

It was certainly safer to use the telephone lines rather than the street.

We can use technology, also, to accomplish our goals.

Secondly, this was an ecumenical squirrel.

It was equally comfortable at the Lutheran Church and the Methodist Church.

It could traverse the distance between the two churches with great confidence.

Truth be told, the squirrel has had more contact with the Methodists than I have had this year.

Thirdly, when the squirrel was out of balance, it knew how to compensate and regain balance. The lesson?

When our lives are out of balance, we can compensate by putting more attention/ energy/ focus in the area that is lacking, in order to regain balance in our lives.

Fourthly, I learned from the squirrel that life is about risk.

You have to venture forth.

Sometimes you get fried, but often you can accomplish great things if you set your mind to it.

I learned all kinds of truths from that squirrel.
Maybe God was speaking to us through that squirrel.
Or....maybe it was just a squirrel on a telephone line.

Stories often have multiple meanings.
They operate at different levels and speak to you in different ways.
The message of a story, and the significance of it for you, depends greatly on the circumstances of your time.
I remember taking a class at the seminary on theology and literature.
Some of the books I read I loved.
Some of the books I just couldn't get into them.
When I shared that with the professor, Gracia Grindal, she said,
"That's OK. That doesn't make the book a bad one.
It just means that you weren't at a spot that you could hear it."
I like that advice.
It reminds me of the old Buddhist principle:
When the student is ready, the teacher will emerge.
The truth we hear in a story is to a great degree a reflection of what we need to hear.

You can read the Bible from four major directions.
You can look at the Scriptures historically, and ask where it fits on a timeline.
You can ask the historical questions: Who/What/Where/When/Why.
That will help you understand what those words meant in those days.
Secondly, you can look at Scripture from a literary perspective.
You can look for literary features, like plot, structures, patterns, characters, key words, the material just before and after.
Thirdly, you can look at Scripture from a theological perspective.
You can ask what key teaching a particular passage gives us.
Finally, you can approach Scripture devotionally.
What does it mean for us today? How is it calling us to faith? How is it challenging us to discipleship?

Our Gospel story today is the Parable of the Talents.
Historically, the story comes from Tuesday of Holy Week.
Jesus had entered the city of Jerusalem.
He was teaching at the Temple.

He was getting into all kinds of trouble with both the religious leaders and the people. His words were challenging.

You speak the words he spoke, and they are going to put you on a cross.

From a theological perspective, our Gospel story comes from a collection of stories and sayings of Jesus that Matthew gathered together in chapters 23-25. These stories have to do with the end times. Eschatology. The Second Coming. Matthew wanted to teach future generations of Christians how to live this side of The Second Coming.

From a literary perspective, even beyond the collection of sayings in the discourse, the parable has a plot line.

A master entrusts great wealth to three servants, and then leaves.

After a long time, he returns.

In the accounting, the first two servants have doubled the master's money.

"Well done, good and faithful servant."

The third was afraid of the master.

He buried the money, and returned it.

The master said, "You are a worthless and lazy slave."

I want to focus on the story's devotional importance.

What is God teaching us through The Parable of the Talents about how we are to live today?

Like most stories, it depends on what you can hear, or need to hear.

One truth plays on the word "talents."

In ancient times, that word referred to a large amount of money.

In modern times, the word "talent" refers to abilities, gifts, skills.

The first two servants in the story used the "talents" trusted to them.

Likewise, you are to use the talents that God has entrusted to you.

You are to use what God has given you for the sake of the kingdom.

You are to be a good steward of the gifts and abilities with which God has blessed you.

That is one devotional message from this story.

If you are not using your talents wisely, faithfully, then you need to hear that message.

The parable can open your heart to grow in your discipleship, to express your faith through the use of your gifts.

There is something else I hear in this parable.

I compare the first two servants in the story with the third one, and I see this:

The first two servants risked the wealth that was entrusted to them.

They doubled the wealth, but they could have lost it.

They risked.

And the master said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."

The third one played it safe: he buried it in the ground.

He didn't even bother with the little interest from the bank.

He was afraid.

The master called him a lazy and unworthy slave.

This is what I hear.

I hear God calling us to risk.

Even when its unpopular. Even when it costs. Even when we could lose.

I'm convinced God does not want to us to play it safe.

I believe God wants us to live out our faith with courage and boldness.

If you are a little cautious, and rarely venture out of your comfort zone, you need to hear this parable.

Again, as I think on this story, I see yet something else.

It has to do with expectation.

I see the first two servants expecting the master to be trusting and rewarding.

The details of the parable express that.

Not so the third servant.

His view of the master is reflected in these words:

"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed."

Two different views, Two different sets of expectations, resulting in two different sets of behaviors by the servants.

What we expect is most often what we see.

Our experience of life is very deeply shaped by our expectations.

What we expect of a person, a given situation, an event, very much determines our experience of it.

If you are negative in attitude, you will find most things in life to be negative.

If you are positive in attitude, you will experience most happenings of life positively.

If you are critical and judgmental, you will find things to criticize and judge.

If you are hopeful, you will find things that give you hope.

If you look for the grace of God, you will find it.

If you look for God's judgment, you will have all kinds of opportunities to see it.

Our expectations shape our experiences.

Our Gospel story today is the Parable of the Talents.

Through it, Jesus teaches us to use our talents, to risk lives of faithfulness, and to be aware of the expectations we bring in our experience of others and of God.

Peace to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.