

Sunday, November 17, 2024

The Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Evensong

4:00 pm

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Mark Schultz

on

Daniel 3; Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43

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This Lovely Terror

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The great temptation, when faced with an apocalyptic reading like that from our Gospel this Evening
(With a blazing furnace at the end of the world prepared for the wicked)

The great temptation is to attenuate its terror.

Surely our Lord doesn't actually mean what he's saying here.

Surely it's all a metaphor: it is a parable after all.

Surely if he does mean what he's saying here...

Surely we're the good ones

Surely we're not sinners, the doers of iniquity, we're actually quite fantastic people!

Surely, we're the ones who'll shine like the sun

Surely God loves us, loves everyone

Surely such a loving God would prepare no such furnace for those he loves.

The great temptation is to attenuate the terror.

And...

I'll not quite be doing that this evening.

Because whatever momentary relief we might feel when we put that fear at arm's reach

We do so at a cost

And that cost is a real, living, breathing, embodied Christian hope

A hope that says: repentance is actually possible,

And it means facing up to hard truths;

Sanctification is actually possible,

And it's not always easy;

Sharing in the blazing sunburst glory of God is actually possible,

And it will never happen without real transformation of life;

Love is actually possible,

And bearing that love, being that love, means sacrifice;

Grace is actually possible,
And it'll never be ours if we don't let go of everything else we cling to
And open our hands to receive it.

I think part of our challenge with this parable,
Is that our Lord has very generously interpreted it for us
In terms that are quite stark: here are the good, here are the bad, and here's what's what.
And that's where we go: we go straight to the interpretation
We want to have it figured out.
But the beauty of a parable is that it's a key to unlock something in us
A spiritual ferment meant to transform our understanding—
We need to let it do its work.
And there's a lot we miss if we breeze past this parable:
A householder sows wheat in his field
Only to discover that his enemy has sown weeds
His servants are eager to remove the weeds, but the householder says,
No: you may uproot the wheat while you're at it. So, let it all grow together, and then, come harvest,
Gather the weeds and burn them, and then bring the wheat into the granary.
Now the word used for weeds in the Greek here isn't random—it refers to darnel weed.
Darnel weed is toxic, potentially lethal, it usually produces dizziness, nausea, sleep.
You wouldn't want to try and make bread out of it: it'd be the opposite of bread
Instead of nourishing, it'd be poisonous.
But that's not the only interesting thing about darnel weed in this parable:
It's sometimes called false wheat, because it looks remarkably like wheat,
The plants virtually indistinguishable...until they're fully grown
When mature darnel weed is noticeably much darker than mature wheat.
The key of the parable turns a bit in the lock of our soul:
Our parable is not about telling good people apart from bad people:
Part of the point is that making the distinction is actually quite hard:
The weeds and the wheat look alike, things aren't exactly as they appear;
And the householder is willing to reserve his judgment and patiently wait 'til the harvest
When everything will be fully revealed and fully known.
No, it's not so much about making a distinction between good and bad people
But the parable is about goodness, righteousness understood in a particular way:
As a revelation of what is true and real,
And wickedness as the revelation of what is false, a lie.
And whatever is false, whatever is a lie is bound for the fire.
It will burn.
God will not abide the lie, the false, the untruth; God will not abide sin and death and wickedness.
Sin and death are not the truth of who we are as human beings
They're interlopers, spiritual illnesses by which we're wounded and oppressed
God will not abide them
And the fire that consumes them is the blazingly fierce glory of love that is the cross of Jesus Christ
That is the serene sovereign judgement of God. And it's good news.
Good not because it's easy, but because it's real.
Because the hard part is: the false, the lie, the untruth, sin, wickedness, death:
They're not outside of us, we don't live at a remove from them.

These are things we do, in our sin-sickness, to ourselves, to each other, and to our world.
We are death infected, and if there is anything in us that is bound up with death
If there is anything in us that clings to death
If there is anything in us that has betrayed or obscured who we are
As God has always known us to be from before the foundations of the world,
The false selves we wrongly call ourselves,
Mere masks of wrath or avarice or envy or hatred or disdain or any other comfortable sin
All that too
Will burn
Until we know ourselves and each other as God has always known us in Jesus Christ.
For consider this:
In his interpretation of the parable our Lord Jesus speaks of the righteous shining forth as the sun.
And the sublime irony is: you don't get to shine that brightly without also being on fire.

Considering a passage from the Epistle to the Hebrews, George MacDonald, author, minister, mentor to CS Lewis, writes:
"Let us look at the utterance of the apostle which is crowned with this lovely terror:
'Our God is a consuming fire.'"
This lovely terror: Our God is a consuming fire.

The call of the Christian life is to become a living flame of love,
To be, by grace, what God is by nature:
And our God is a consuming fire of love.
If transformation, renewal, repentance, redemption, sanctification
Are to be real possibilities for which we earnestly and longingly hope,
Realities in which we yearn more fully to participate,
We mustn't keep the fire at arm's length; indeed, we cannot.
If those of us who suspect with sorrow and trembling that, even on our best days,
We are more weed than wheat: if we are to be transfigured into a glory of joy we cannot fully imagine:
Only the consuming fire will do
Only the love of God in Christ
Only the cross
Only the empty tomb and the Resurrection Light
Only the flaming dove of the Paraclete
Will do.
And as the patient, kindly fire illuminates and fiercely frees us
From all the falsehood, dross, sin and death
That prevents us from giving and receiving, being and becoming love's flame,
We can find ourselves even now brightly shining with the splendor of grace,
Righteous not in spite of- or apart from the furnace's fervor, but because of it.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.
