

Sermon – Faithful in a Little
Sunday, September 18, 2016
Scripture Readings: I Timothy 2:1-7, Luke 16:1-11
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Our first scripture reading is I Timothy 2:1-7. As the decades passed after Jesus' resurrection, the new Christian communities realized that Jesus would not return soon. They had to find ways to organize their lives for worship and service. Leaders like Paul wrote letters of teaching, encouragement and direction to help believers live in the world and not of the world. The letters to Timothy date from a later time than the life of Paul, however they reflect Paul's teaching and desire to pass on a lifetime of wisdom to a younger leader. In the first passage, the author teaches about prayer, reminding Christians to pray for everyone. Listen to what the Spirit is saying.

1 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. 3 This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, 4 who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. 5 For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, 6 who gave himself a ransom for all —this was attested at the right time. 7 For this I was appointed a herald and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying), a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

The Second scripture reading is Luke 16:1-11. The parable of the unjust steward has baffled interpreters over the years. If Dr. Amy-Jill Levine were here, she would highlight that central to first-century middle-eastern cultures in the relationships between clients and patrons is the notion of honor and shame. In the intricate web of business relationships, the more clients and influential patrons' one had, the more honor they had. In this parable both the manager and the rich man are motivated by the desire to avoid shame. I think it is worth pointing out that Jesus' is not affirming the dishonest steward for being dishonest but for his ability to be shrewd, decisive, perceptive, discerning, smart, sharp, wise, clever, resourceful, and astute, especially in practical matters. These are the qualities Jesus wants his disciples to emulate. Hear now the word of God.

16 Then Jesus said to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. 2 So he summoned him and said to him, 'What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.' 3 Then the manager said to himself, 'What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.' 5 So, summoning his master's debtors one by one, he asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 He answered, 'A hundred jugs of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.' 7 Then he asked another, 'And how much do you owe?' He replied, 'A hundred containers of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill and make it eighty.' 8 And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth^[b] so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal home "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth,^[d] who will entrust to you the true riches?

The title of the sermon: Faithful in a Little

Text: Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much... Luke 16:10

Loving God, thank you for revealing yourself to us in Jesus Christ. Give us the courage to embrace the gospel with all our being and the humility to affirm that you are beyond each of us and all of us. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Fifteen years ago, a few weeks following 9/11, I drove from St. Louis to Chicago alone in our Volkswagen Beetle to be with my mom. She was having surgery to remove half of her lung following the discovery of a small tumor of lung cancer.

On that car trip, I listened to Karen Armstrong's book *The History of God* on tape. It was an important journey and healing in many ways. Along with my personal concern for my mother's health (who will celebrate her 90th birthday this year), like most of America, I was still baffled by the devastating events in New York City. As an associate pastor, I wanted to be a source of strength for the members of Webster Groves Presbyterian Church who were asking important questions about other faiths.

Today I would like to talk about being a Christian in an Age of Religious Pluralism. How do we embrace our Christian faith and respect the faith traditions of others?

Here are some practical ways we are doing this at Westminster. As a part of our Confirmation journey, our young people visit a synagogue and a mosque to affirm other worship experiences and the elements we hold in common. Last year's Adult Education Forum welcomed Rabbi Marks and Dr. Mostoufi in an exploration of our faith traditions. We will follow up in another forum in the spring of 2017. Growing out of this initiative, the Reverend Dreitcer is introducing a new opportunity for children in Grades 1-6 in the Children of Abraham program. The purpose of bringing our children together is not to talk theology. The purpose is for our children to get to know one another, with differing faiths and races, to discover all we have in common, and to work together on a service project that will benefit other children.

In today's scripture reading, 1 Timothy 2:5 we read: *For there is one God: there is one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for all.* This way of speaking about Christ, at times, has led to a sense of Christian exclusivity, that Christianity is the only way to experience God.

This is a little ironic when one considers the original intent of asserting God's universal love in the epistles! It was to encourage early believers to be open to outsiders and to remind them that God's concern is not limited to them but is for all people who are also God's children. The intent was to widen the circle of God's love and to discourage self-centeredness!

The truth is that such an understanding of God's universal love calls forth an openness and acceptance of the other in terms broader than one's own. Therefore early Christians were encouraged to pray for all people because no one is excluded from God's generosity in Jesus Christ!

It is my hope and prayer that we at Westminster continue the tradition in the early church of being open to others in terms broader than our own; and that we continue to deepen our understanding

of what it means to be a Christian, while affirming the validity of other traditions and expressions of faith.

Sadly, a misconception about how to do this is to water down our Christian beliefs! We don't want to talk too much about Jesus. My friends, we need not apologize for or diminish the beliefs that are at the heart of our faith. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, for us as Christians, just as the Quran is the revelation of God for the Muslims, and the Torah is at the heart of the Jewish faith tradition. Each of our scriptures have a sense of elitism and difficult passages with which to grapple ... not unlike our parable of the dishonest steward in today's readings.

The task, therefore, is not to water down Christian beliefs, rather the task is for Christians to live ever more deeply into the Christian tradition itself, seeking to be faithful in a little, and as children of the light, Jesus encourages us to be shrewd, decisive, perceptive, discerning, smart, sharp, wise, clever, resourceful, and astute, especially in practical matters, in the living of our faith. Let us not apologize for who we are because deep down we think we are better than others or believe we are the only winners in the game. Let us not stop living for Christ, listening to Christ's voice, and discerning how we will respond to the call to serve the least among us.

Huston Smith, a contemporary scholar of religion put it this way: *If what you're looking for is water, it is better to dig one well 60 feet deep than to dig six wells ten feet deep.* Inter-faith dialogue between a watered-down Christian and a watered-down Muslim is not very interesting, however inter-faith dialogue between people who have been transformed by living ever more deeply into their tradition is extraordinarily rich. The individual perspectives add to a deeper understanding of the whole! So to be a Christian in an age of religious pluralism means to find one's home in Christianity, even as one respects the homes others have found in their faith tradition.

We can affirm that *God our Savior desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth, we can embrace Jesus Christ, the one mediator between God and humankind that has been revealed to us.* And we can acknowledge that God's ways are ultimately beyond ours. As the psalmist proclaims, *"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it."* At some point theology must simply give way to wondering worship and compassion.

The Disciple Study: *Christian Believer—Knowing God with Heart and Mind* begins with these words. *To be human is to be a believer. We differ in what we believe, and in the intensity of our beliefs, but we insist on believing in something. Life simply can't exist without some such basis. These beliefs become the set-of-sails that determine the direction of our lives and our destination; and also, of course, the nature and quality of our journey. So we have no option as to whether we will believe. The issue is in what we believe. And for Christians, more specifically, in whom we will believe,*

May we each travel this journey, being faithful in a little, not apologizing for being shrewd, decisive, perceptive, discerning, smart, sharp, wise, clever, resourceful, and astute, especially in practical matters, and respecting the beliefs of those we meet along the way. By the grace of God, may it be so. Amen.