

Pentecost 24A, Proper 28. Matthew 25:14-30. November 15, 2020.

If I were going to choose how to have a last in-person Eucharist of the year, this is not the one I would choose: in the rain and the cold, outside, with severe limitations on how many of us can attend. As lovely in many ways as our sojourn on the lawn has been, in this weather I would have us inside for a last Eucharist, with the choir singing the roof off and all of us receiving communion in both kinds at the altar rail. But no one in power consulted me about the escalation of a global pandemic or the weather. And so here we are in the cold rain, praying together and receiving Eucharist as best we can.

Christians have received communion in more adverse circumstances. One of the legends of St. Christopher's involves one of my predecessors, the Reverend Hedley H. Cooper. He left this rather plum job as rector of St. Christopher's to be a chaplain in World War I, where he ministered to the soldiers until he was killed, apparently helping the wounded during a surprise attack. Years later, the legend goes, the communion set St. Christopher's had given him was found on the battlefield and maybe even returned. The Reverend Cooper isn't the point of this sermon, but he reminds us of some of what we, as a historical community, have endured. When your engraved communion kits are found in the trenches of France from 1918, you're a church that knows something about ministry in hard circumstances. Times are bad now, and the bishop has taken the prudent step to suspend again all in-person worship and meetings after today. But as bad as times are, we together and in the grace of God can encounter them with faith, hope, and love. These aren't the circumstances I would have chosen, to live in or to pray through, but this is the world we have, and it's a privilege to be the priest out here in the rain and the cold, now during the pandemic, with you.

These also aren't the readings I would have chosen for a last Eucharist before what might be an extended lockdown. We aren't quite filled with hope by Zephaniah's insistence that the day of the Lord is bad news for the religiously cynical, nor by Jesus' strange parable about the merits of investment banking and the punishment for low returns. I have some ideas, but not too much certainty, about what is going on in this parable. One of the best I've heard is that Jesus is holding a mirror up to the world, more than he is describing the world that will be. But I'm pretty sure that something we can learn about Christian life from this story is that we cannot do it without risk. I'm not sure whether the money entrusted to each servant is a metaphor or what it might be a metaphor for, but I am sure that the two servants who get commended are the two who are willing to take risks.

These can't be risks that put other suffering people in danger. They can't be the foolhardy health risks for the sake of pleasure or convenience that we've all seen so much of in recent months—and which have helped bring us back to a new lockdown. It must be risk that we take on ourselves, and for the benefit of others. Yes, as in the parable, this probably means financial risks, though I imagine that it would be financial risks for the good of our neighbors, rather than for a rich absentee investment client. But also it would have to include moral and emotional risk:

the risk of looking stupid, the risk of messing up, the risk of failure. How much love do we decline to share because we will not take the risk of embarrassment?

What is not in this parable, but is certainly true, is that Christians can embrace a life of risk because of the assurance of the resurrection. Neither failure nor death are the worst things that can happen to us, because we live in the hopes of redemption and resurrection. And so we can love a little recklessly, we can take on unpromising necessary projects, we can give ourselves away because our selves are held through life and death by God. God will forgive us. God will raise us to new life.

Now, we are in a time when safety is a virtue and risk sounds like a naughty word. So let me be very clear that I am not advocating the kind of risky, reckless behavior that endangers other people. As we head into another lockdown, I'm talking about the risk of reaching out when we aren't sure what the response will be. I'm talking about the risk of trying to build community across borders even when we don't know how. I'm talking about the risk of affirming truth and justice even when it may hurt our standing in the eyes of people who matter to us. These coming days are going to ask much of us. If our priority is to hide and guard what we have been given, we will not meet these days with faithfulness. But if we take the risk of love in a brutal life, the risk of hope in frightening days, we can be a part of God's long coming redemption of the world. God is with us. Amen.