

Faithless servants

Matthew 24:36-51

April 6, 2014

I want to begin where I ended last Sunday, talking about witness, because that's what this is all about ... witness.

We are the body of Christ in this world. We are Christ in this world. When the people of this world look at us, what do they see? When the people of this world look at you, what do they see? We are Christ in this world. When the people of this world look at us, what Christ do they see?

When the people of this world look at our churches, what Christ do they see? When they look at First Congregational United Church of Christ or Trinity American Lutheran Church or Christian Fellowship Baptist Church or Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church? When they look at the United Church of Christ, the Roman Catholic Church, the Methodists, the Southern Baptists, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Pentecostals? Because it doesn't really matter what the name on the door is, does it? As far as the rest of the world is concerned, we're all the same thing. When the people of this world look at Christians, what do they see? What Christ do they see?

When a church protects the sexual predators in its midst and so slowly, so hesitantly, so begrudgingly, comes to terms with its own responsibility, its own guilt, what Christ do they see?

When the membership of a church looks much like the membership of a country club, when gays and lesbians, or poor people or disabled people, or people with tattoos or people with nose rings, or mentally ill people, or people who just don't look the same or dress the same or think the same are not welcomed with open arms, what Christ do they see?

When a church is full of petty and judgmental people, when a church is full of snobs and gossipers, what Christ do they see?

When a church is full of hypocrites, with people who sing the songs and say the prayers and hear the gospel, but live by a wholly different set of rules, what Christ do they see?

When a church is full of itself, trumpeting its status, boasting of its achievements, pointing to its numbers, counting its dollars, what Christ do they see?

When a church is eager to gain market share, when, though it would never admit to it, it is in feverish competition with its sister churches for bodies and for money and for prestige, what Christ do they see?

When a church eats and drinks and makes merry and keeps holidays, while hungry and thirsty and unhappy and lonely people pass by its doors, unnoticed and uncared for, what Christ do they see?

Any Christ worth seeing? Any Christ worth knowing? That's the damage, the unthinkable damage, done by the thieves and hypocrites and murderers and vultures -- not out there, but among us! When the people of this world look at us, they see ... nothing, nothing that matters, just more of the same, just more of the same. Our witness to anything like good news is empty and meaningless, and our witness to Christ -- we have no credible witness to Christ! That's the damage done by thieves and hypocrites and murderers and vultures ... and faithless servants.

Next on the list are faithless servants, and -- trust me! -- you don't want to be a faithless servant. Jesus tells us "that servant's master will come back one day when the servant does not expect him and at a time he does not know [and] will cut him in pieces!" And then after this faithless servant is cut into pieces, he will cry and gnash his teeth, though I don't understand how you can cry and gnash your teeth after you've been cut up into pieces! The translation from the Greek is disputed. Instead of "cut him in pieces," some translate the phrase as "cut him off" or "throw him out," but, in any case, thrown out or cut in pieces, you don't want to be the faithless servant.

Who is the faithless servant? According to Jesus, two things identify a servant as a bad servant, a faithless servant. Number one: a faithless servant is not ready. He is not prepared for his master's return. And number two: a faithless servant is not doing her job.

Faithless servants are not ready. When should you be ready? All the time! Because no one knows. No one knows when that day and hour will come.

Jesus, along with the faithful people of God before him and the faithful people of God after him, see all of history as moving toward a definite end. There will come a day, a day when history, or, at least, history as we know it, this age, will come to an end, a day of reckoning, but, more than that, a day of redemption and renewal, a day when things, all things, will be put right, a day when earth and heaven and all things will be made new. And Jesus says, no one, not even he, has any idea when that day will come.

So we need to be ready! We need to stay awake! We need to watch out! It will be, Jesus says, like the days of Noah. Anybody seen the “Noah” movie? I haven’t and almost certainly won’t. As one reviewer put it: “Read the book.”

The point is, nobody was ready. Nobody knew. They were just going about their usual business, carrying on with their normal lives, when in a moment, the waters came and swept them away. That’s what it will be like, Jesus says, when the Son of Man comes, when that day comes.

Two men will be working in a field: one will be taken away, the other will be left behind ... Two women will be at a mill grinding meal: one will be taken away, the other will be left behind.

Left behind. There’s another movie, actually a series of movies, based on a series of books. A new “Left Behind” movie remake, starring Nicholas Cage, will be released to a theater near you very soon. The books and movies tell the story of the people “left behind” after the Rapture, after God’s faithful believers are suddenly and mysteriously removed from the face of the earth, just before the earth and the people left behind are visited by a time of great suffering and turmoil, apostasy and conflict.

I am not going to take the time now to discuss the particular theology behind the book and movies, but you should know that their title is taken from these verses in Matthew 24, and that, in their way of thinking, being “taken away” is a good thing, and being “left behind” is a bad thing. But is that what Jesus implies? Could it be that the whole framework of this “end-times timeline” is based on a misconception?

When the Lord comes, it will be just like in the days of Noah! The waters came and swept them all away, except for the few, in Noah’s boat, who were left ... behind! Being left behind is a good thing! You want to be left behind. You want to be left, here, living your life, doing your job. You don’t want to be taken away.

You want to be here, doing your job. Faithless servants are not ready, because they are not doing their job, and they will be taken away. Faithful servants are ready, at any time, because they are doing their job, day by day, year by year, generation by generation.

And what is their job? What is your job? The faithful servant is the one put in charge of the other servants “to give them their food at the proper time.” Your job is to watch out for your buddies, your brothers and sisters, your neighbors, your friends. Your job is to take care of each other.

Our job is to take care of each other. Our job as a church, as churches, as members of the body of Christ, our job as Christ in this world, is to watch out for each other, to take care of each other, not competing with each other, not bickering with each other, not shutting each other out, not beating each other up, not dividing the church into little pieces.

Shame on us! We should be doing our job! We are supposed to be feeding each other, at the proper time. And the proper time for feeding, of course, comes three times a day, every day!

It's all about witness. We are the body of Christ in this world. We are Christ in this world. When the people of this world look at us, what do they see? When the people of this world look at Christians, what do they see?

“See how they love each other!”

Now that would be a witness, a powerful witness, a witness to something good, a witness to Someone good. “See how they love each other” makes “see how he loves us” believable. So the world will believe. “May they be one so that the world will believe that you sent me.”

May we be one, loving each other, feeding each other, just as Jesus loves us and feeds us.