

**SERMONS AT TRINITY**

**Sunday, November 16, 2008**

**“We are not preservationists”**

The Rev. R. Cameron Miller

Good morning.

My Dad remembers a time when most homes had neither electricity nor indoor plumbing. I remember a time when there weren't personal computers. So way back then, at the dawn of civilization when the massive A-frame computers the size of this chancel gave birth to the little home computer, I was a Mac user.

In those days the war between Mac users and PC users was neither friendly nor humorous as the Mac commercials now depict. It was a techno Hatfield's & McCoy's.

When I arrived at Trinity in 1999, the church had three 1985-era computers that were not networked with each other. I insisted that we remedy the situation immediately but I also recognized that the current staff, that two of whom only used the word processing programs were not going to be able to adapt to Mac. I swallowed hard and became a PC user. Now, ten years later, I have returned to Mac.

Now all this is utterly irrelevant except, part of my job, part of thinking theologically, is reflecting upon almost everything – even the most inane experiences.

I have been dealing with default settings lately. For those of you who do not use a computer, and I know there are some, part of the convenience of computers is that they remember what settings you like to use for what tasks. There a thousand possible default settings, thousands perhaps if you are a geek and really enjoy the technology rather than just using it.

Anyway, I have had to learn all over again, or I should say I am learning all over again, how to set the defaults on my Mac and playing with what I like best for what programs. A great deal has changed in the numerous generations of Mac's that gave birth to one another in that ten years.

So I am thinking a lot about defaults lately. What normally is in the background and assumed is now something I clumsily trip over and think about.

The story in Matthew today is about our personal default settings. Is our default, our usual inclination, set on fear? Or is it set on another option... like trust. And if trust, trust in what or whom?

One of my default settings as a preacher is to tell you something about the Bible that we hear read on any given Sunday morning even though to do so may be a distraction.

For instance, I could just make the leap from the story about the Master and 3 slaves to default settings and not get into the story itself. That might be a better option but I would have to go into my Preacher program and change the default setting to allow me to do that...and while I thought about it, I didn't do it. So let me just say a little something about the slave story to keep my preacher default happy.

Now...with this story of the Master with 3 slaves I have to drill through multiple layers of *negative* reaction to figure out the wisdom Jesus is offering in it. Digging down into the first layer we have to deal with slavery. You see, nowhere in the Bible, and not in this parable, is the institution of slavery questioned.

Slavery in the Roman Empire, and before it, was not racial in nature. Slaves were the spoils of war and of economic misery...If you were poor enough you sold your kids, your wife or even yourself into slavery.

But my problem here, and maybe you felt this too, Jesus just *assumes* slavery in this story instead of objecting to it. Assuming slavery is in conflict with another of my default settings – yours too I am sure. But what makes it worse is that the “Master” in this story is supposed to be God. And what we may have noticed is that the “Master” gives his slaves a unimaginable burden. Those silver coins, or gold coins in some translations, or the more familiar “talents” as the RSV translates it, represents a vast sum.

What the Master gives the slaves amounts to more money than even the richest person here could imagine. It equates to *billions*...billions of dollars in our day. A slave would no more have known what to do with a billion dollars than a dog knows what to do with a diamond. It would have terrified all three of them. *Terror*, absolute terror, that is what it would have meant to those three poor slob.

But there is even more that is disconcerting in this story from Matthew. In the end it seems to be all about reward and punishment and that creates a conflict with another of my defaults. In the story, God has an abusive parenting style that just doesn't sit well.

Clearly the third slave had his default setting on prudence and caution, to give them their positive value, or *fear and mistrust* which is what the Master named them. In the end, the poor, terrified slave – whose internal formatting was limited to the choices between fear of failure, fear of dangers, fear of judgment, fear of public humiliation, fear of punishment and fear of disapproval – not only has to go on living in the shadow of such fears but has now been condemned to also live in isolation. Where's the fairness? Where's the mercy? Where's the love?

My theological default is set on a God who is more gracious, more merciful, more loving and so the story creates a dysfunction in me. I have to confess to you that I go through this kind of a struggle with the Bible on a regular basis, and it is usually when I am feeling an almost visceral hostility toward a Bible story that *Horton hears the Who...* or that Cam gets humbled.

If you have ever been quoted in the press, or your comments have ever become the object of rumor, then you know that *context* is everything. Once we get the context of Jesus' parable it begins to seep in and do its work.

So here's the context of this Master and 3 slaves story. Jesus has just had a big argument with the religious authorities who in the story are not people of good will. They keep looking for ways to sabotage Jesus' popularity and even some way to manipulate the Romans into arresting him.

Jesus understand he is vulnerable and at the end of the argument, as he is walking away and muttering to himself, somebody overhears him lament that *they just won't listen to me*. So he makes some dark, oblique prediction about *his* own death and even about the destruction of the holy city of Jerusalem. (Matthew 23:37ff) Then, it says, Jesus and his pals stomp off.

They leave the city and climb up the hill to the Mount of Olives, and there they sit down on a spot overlooking the city of Jerusalem. The corollary for us would be sitting in a boat out on the Canadian side of the river looking back at the City of Buffalo, its lights just beginning to flicker into the dusk.

Anyway, his disciples point out the Temple below and how beautiful it looks from up there. And Jesus says, “*You see that beautiful Temple there? I tell you, there will come a time when there is not one stone left piled upon another stone...It will all be rubble.*”

Shocked at the thought, as we would be to contemplate the destruction of Trinity Church or City Hall, the disciples asked *when* is this going to happen? And with that Jesus launches into a long speech.

Like Moses at the edge of the Promise Land, or Martin Luther King, Jr. on the eve of his death, it was a speech intended to prepare his disciples for what was to come. At the end of that speech, he tells his friends four stories, and each story directs them *away* from the question about *when* will it happen, and toward the question about what they should *DO* between now and then.\*

\*See [Texts for Preaching](#) by Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa and Newsome

*That* is the context in which Jesus tells the story of the Master with 3 slaves. It is told as part of a speech to prepare his friends to focus on the *present* even in the midst of crisis. The question is not *when* will the crisis arrive, or *when* will the crisis be over, the question is what are we to *do* now, in the *present*, between now and then...whenever *then* is. The question is not *when* or *how*, the issue is what we *DO* in the meantime?

Well...we're in a crisis aren't we? We are in the kind of crisis Jesus was trying to lead his friends through with the story we just heard.

Clear away all the debris from the conflicts that occur between the cultural and historic defaults of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judeans and 21<sup>st</sup> century Buffalonians, and we have a story that Jesus told to people like us who were in a crisis like we are. Knowing that makes me feel a little more intimate with Jesus, and as if he may have some wisdom for me even though he lived at a time well before computers.

*Preserving the principal* is our default...most of us. *Preserving the principal* and not risking failure is our normal default in times of crisis. *Preserving the principal* and a profound mistrust that God has any application whatsoever

in our software is the usual default posture for most of us in crisis. *Preserving the principal* is an apt Financial metaphor since we are in a time of Financial crisis.

A 401K has a *principal amount* of which 5% annually a retiree can spend without damaging its *principal*. Or a Church or not-for-profit with an endowment has a principal of which 5% annually can be spent on programs or other expenses without eroding the *principal*.

*Preserving the principal* is what we are taught to do so that in times of crisis we have something to protect us from...from whatever it is we fear that money protects us from. Preservation is our default mode, especially in a time of crisis, but the slave that played it safe is angrily condemned. In burying that which he was given stewardship over, it actually lost value given inflation.

Stuffing the mattress with cash actually makes it loose value. Only with the risk of investment does it have the potential to grow. Jesus did not know anything about computers nor did he know anything about Wall Street but all the elements of greed and risk and crisis existed in his day. Jesus charges us with taking risks and launching out with venturesomeness at the very moment everyone else around us is cringing with fear.

*Preserving the principal* may be what an endowment is supposed to do, but it is not the mark of fidelity for a community of faith that says it is an agent of the love of God and that its mission is *to name and heal the wounds of injustice*.

In a time of crisis, *spiritual wellness* is discovered and displayed by taking the risk to love more boldly, and act more vigorously in solidarity with those who have been most vulnerable. *That is our call*, yours and mine, and Jesus is holding our feet to that fire.

We are *not*, we are *not* in the preservation business. We are *not*, we are *not* the custodians of an historic building, nor of a particular body of ritual and worship, language or music.

We *are*, we *are* the stewards of the gospel and love of God made know through community.

Whether as individuals trying to figure out how to move through this current crisis or ours, or as the community of faith we call Trinity, we need to be paying attention to our default settings.

If our default setting is fear, caution, *preservation of the principal* – whatever corpus of treasure it is we huddle around – Jesus warns us to change the default. Trust ourselves, he says. Trust God, he says. Trust the essential abundance and goodness of the Creation, he says. Assume history is moving toward a more splendid moment even if we cannot see it, even if we may not get there for the final show, he says.

Take risks. Invest yourself and your treasures and don't bury what you've got, because keeping it safe is not only a delusion it is a losing strategy.

So...let me end with where this congregation set its default ten years ago.

Our buddy Judy Shanley was the chairperson of the Rector Search Committee back in 1999. They found a prayer that set the default for their search process – perhaps it was as a flare sent up in hopes of attracting a kindred spirit. They gave me a calligraphy copy of it in November 1999 and it hangs by my office door. It is printed in your Worship Guide and I think, in a time of a global stewardship crisis, it is still a pretty good prayer to help set our default. So let's say it together.

Let us pray.

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,  
when our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little,  
when we arrived safely because we sail too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when in the abundance of things we possess  
we have lost our thirst for the waters of life...  
having fallen in love with life we have ceased to dream,  
when in our effort to build a new earth, we have allowed our  
vision of a new heaven to dim.*

**DISTURB US, LORD,**

**TO DARE MORE BOLDLY,**

*to venture on wilder seas where storms will show your mastery,  
where losing sight of land we find stars,  
we ask you to push back the horizon of our hopes  
and to push us in the future of strength, courage, hope, love.*

*This we ask in the Name of our captain, who is Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

Great. Now...having just asked God to kick our butts, the first opportunity we have to venture out away from the shores of comfort is waiting for us at the desk in the red carpet area. If you have discovered something here, among this peculiar people and in this uncommon place that is valuable to you...then you need to share it. Love that is not shared becomes exhausted and dies. We know that because all of us have let love die more than once for lack of sharing.

Share the Trinity DVD with someone you care about. In fact, as we come forward to light candles this morning, I invite you to bring with you a prayer for someone who you know is in need of a community where people acknowledge that they have brokenness, and where they can seek healing, and where they will likely find arms open as widely as they know how to spread them.