

Sermon for the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
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November 19, 2017
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

After two thousand years, it's nearly impossible to separate the church from its art—stained glass windows, statues, altar clothes, icons. We're a visual religion as much as a spoken one. These pictures were a main vehicle of the faith for a largely illiterate congregation. Folks got pretty good at seeing a small symbol and understanding a much larger story—tens of thousands of Marys with her folded hands and blue veil. St. Peter with his keys. St. Paul and St. Timothy in their boat, planting churches around the Mediterranean. St. Lydia with her purple shawl.

St. George is easily recognizable and one of my favorites. He is always seated on a bright white horse, with a halo around his head and a spear in his hand. Usually, somewhere toward the bottom of the image, you can see a small dragon, crouching and sometimes spitting fire. The story goes, of course, that faithful George cleaned the dragons out of England. Some people think the dragons were an allegorical way to talk about pagans. Some people think St. George never existed and the story is silly. I don't particularly care about the history. I look at that image and see such power and an enviable sense of right and wrong. Saint is good. Dragon is bad. Saint kills Dragon and saves day.

Put a pin in St. George for a minute. We'll get back to him. I want to bring your attention to the Gospel of Matthew—both this morning's Gospel and the stories we've been hearing for weeks now. Matthew, like all Biblical authors, has a particular point of view. I sometimes call him the angry gospel writer. Matthew is where we hear about the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the chaff, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness. It's probably not fair to call him entirely angry because Matthew also writes the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says "blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God." So he can't be all bad.

I want to give you a key to understanding all these scary Matthew passages. In Matthew's point of view, there is absolutely no difference between a person and his or her actions. There are other Christian schools of thought that put a lot of emphasis on spiritual purity, the ascent of the soul, having right thinking about this or that topic. That's not how Matthew operates. Matthew believes that you have right choices and wrong choices. And he also believes that when we chose the wrong, there are consequences. For Matthew, choosing the wrong will cast someone into outer darkness with the aforementioned weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That's not exactly how we talk as modern people. But I think it's safe to say that a person could make Matthew's argument today: we are a collection of our choices. We should choose the right. When we choose the wrong, there are future consequences. I don't see outer darkness in our future, but I could very well see a nuclear winter. When we worship power over people, we have chosen the wrong, and there will be consequences for all of us.

In Matthew's version of Jesus' parable, we learn about a landowner who goes away and leaves his servants in charge of his money. Two of the servants invest the money and return a profit to

the master. A third buries the money and returns just the original amount to the master, and he is scolded and whipped.

In our context, I think this parable has lost a strong context for meaning. We're the descendants of slavers and slaves in the Atlantic slave trade, and we know the horror of that barbaric institution. So, any parable where God is the slaveowner is going to create dissonance for us and erode its own meaning. Also, when the message is reduced to economics—investing or burying money in the ground—it can make God seem greedy, which isn't a worthy God to serve.

Let's play with the metaphor. What if the talents in the story aren't some kind of passive gift that you get. What if, instead, they are a task. What if God is pulling you aside and pointing out a dragon that needs slaying. What if, there is, right now, some dragon in your life, neighborhood, work, family, or church that needs a good killing. And what if this task has been handed to you by God.

What a thought! Imagine that, at this very moment, there is some work that you are called to do in the world. And imagine the consequences if you do not heed the call, do not slay the dragon. Outer Darkness is one way to think about it. But maybe another way to think about it is this: if we don't do that which we are called to do, the world will be crawling with fire-breathing monsters. It's not a particularly subtle metaphor, but our current geopolitical climate isn't subtle either.

Maybe there's an issue in your neighborhood you need to get involved in. Maybe there's something here at church that you want to become a partner in but have been too afraid or too busy. Perhaps God is calling you to stand up and fight for something that is right at the state or national level. I'm not sure, but I have a feeling that if you really think about it, there is some dragon in your life that you are called to slay. God has no hands but ours, and there are a lot of dragons out there.

Maybe you've been given a coin to invest. Maybe you've been given a dragon to slay. Pick your metaphor, but either way, God is in the business of calling us. God has given you a precious vocation that is not to be squandered or there will be consequences.

So pray. Discern where God is calling you. Figure out what gifts you've been given to help make the world as it looks more like the world as it should be. Then get on your bright white horse and get to it. You are all St. George. Amen.