

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Building Up Each Other”
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Ordinary 33—November 19, 2017

Lessons: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25: 14-30

It used to be that we Presbyterian preachers, like some of our Baptist and Congregational siblings, were known for our Fire and Brimstone, or hellfire preaching. Some of you may know the famous sermon preached in 1741 in Enfield, CT, by a Yale graduate named Jonathan Edwards: *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. In that sermon, Edwards offers as good an example of hellfire preaching as I know.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.¹

How would you like to hear that kind of a message on a regular basis? I can’t imagine preaching that kind of a sermon, here or anywhere else, but I think of those fire and brimstone sermons whenever our lessons start talking about the day of the Lord, the day that will come upon us like a thief in the night, the day when they say: There is peace and security and then sudden destruction will come upon them, ...and there will be no escape.² I think of those hellfire sermons when I read passages like Matthew’s Gospel today when we hear of so called worthless people thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It paints a grim picture.

Presbyterians are not simply known for hellfire preaching. We are also known for focusing on sin. Some of you may remember the prayer of confession found in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer and our own Book of Common Worship where we prayed: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But Thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.”³

We don’t usually talk that way anymore. Our prayer books have removed much of that language. Yet I want to suggest that the idea that we all are sinners is actually good news. Any one of us who takes an honest look at ourselves will know how we fall short of God’s desire for us. That is true for all of us and knowing that reality can actually free us to be honest with ourselves and those around us. All during the week, groups of people meet downstairs. They are people who know that they have problems. That’s why they are meeting, and when they speak, they always begin by introducing themselves saying: “Hi, I’m Roger, or Bill, or Sally, or Faith. I’m an alcoholic.” And the rest of the group responds: “Hi, Faith, Hi Roger.” It is a place where they are honest with themselves and with that honesty, they build up each other.

Paul today writes to those early Thessalonian Christians and speaks of the day of the Lord, and then he says, “Beloved, you are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you...you are all children of light and children of the day. So stay awake, put on faith and love and the hope of salvation, for

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Online Edition by: International Outreach, Inc. P. O. Box 1286, Ames, Iowa 50014. <http://www.jonathan-edwards.org/Sinners.pdf>

² 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3

³ The Book of Common Worship, © 1946 The Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.

God destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ...therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”⁴

Do not be afraid. God isn't out to get you. God already knows all about us, everything there is to know, even those things we've kept carefully hidden away, and God still loves every last one of us. Maybe up here we should greet each other proclaiming: Hi, I'm Tom and I'm a sinner. Hi Tom. When we talk of the day of the Lord, or judgement day, we do not need to be afraid.

Matthew's Gospel is a bit of a surprise too. A rich landowner goes on a journey and before he goes, he gives his servants various talents, five to one, three to another, and one to a third. The first two invest those talents and double their investment and the master praises their good work. The third is afraid and he buries his single talent because he doesn't want to lose it, and who can blame him, yet he is the one who receives the master's anger.

You should know that this was written at a time when the church was actively waiting for the return of Jesus. The people of the church thought he might return at any time—like a thief in the night—and they struggled with what church people should do in the meantime. Each of the parables in this twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew encourages the reader to be faithful, to be prepared, to be ready to risk herself or himself for the sake of the gospel. As Professor Charles Cousar says, “Waiting and watching for Jesus' return really means being good stewards of all our resources.”⁵ God actually wants us to use the talents, the treasures that we've been given. Part of being a good steward is actually not being afraid. The reason the third servant buried his treasure is that he was afraid. As my friend Gene McAfee puts it: “The difference between a one-talent person and a ten-talent person is not talent; it's fear.”⁶ Gene goes on to suggest that the difference between a one-talent church and a ten-talent church is also fear.

My word for us today is do not be afraid. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation. So spend your energy and your time on encouraging and building up each other. Do we have problems. Of course we do. We have them here. We have them in our country and we have them around the world. But those problems are as nothing when compared to the power of God at work in our midst.

Just last week you all raised over five hundred dollars for Presbyterian Mission co-workers who serve people in South Sudan. Yesterday morning there were people here preparing food for Emmanuel Dining Room. Earlier this year, this small congregation decided to purchase our own set of hand bells, even though any logical person would say we don't have enough people to field a full bell choir, but Bruce hasn't let that get in the way of creating not one but rather two bell choirs in addition to our vocal choir. And those things don't even begin to show the special ways that you care for each other, especially when you are hurting or in special need. Time and again, I'm encouraged when I see you quietly and without fanfare reaching out to others in this community who are facing a difficult time simply to remind them that they are not alone, that you will be right alongside them in their time of need.

It isn't just here. Our sisters and brothers in Sutherland Springs, Texas were in worship again last week singing God's praise and steadfastly building up each other, in much the same way that our sisters and brothers in Charleston, South Carolina gathered and continue to gather and worship together after the tragedy they suffered in 2015.

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 5: 4-11 abbreviated.

⁵ Charles B. Cousar, in *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV, Year A.* © 1995 Westminster John Knox Press.

⁶ Eugene C. McAfee, *Getting Ready for Judgment Day*, sermon preached at Faith United Church of Christ, Richmond Heights, OH, November 13, 2005.

Do not be afraid. God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing marvelously.

Let us pray: From across the expanse of centuries and cultures, languages and faiths, we hear your call O God, to live the abundant life you came to give. Overcome our fear with your promise. Grant us wisdom and grant us courage for the living of our days. For Christ's sake we ask this. Amen.