

Hollywood Handshake

1 Thess. 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Slide: The Great British Bake Off

The Great British Baking Show, otherwise known to people in Great Britain as “Bake Off”, is such a positive and heartwarming show on Netflix, and it’s great for my mental health. I’m pretty sure that I have shared how much I like this show with you before, but this new season is on now and it’s better than ever. This week, I especially needed the breather. With over 11,000 dead in Gaza, a cancer of antisemitism hitting college campuses and elsewhere, and US senators behaving like children out on a playground, I’m pretty sure this show is saving me. Of course, I am being a bit glib about that. It isn’t actually saving me, but whenever I put that show on, for one hour, I feel my shoulders lower, recognizing that they had been tight and up to my ears.

Slide: Pie

I am no baker. I do bake and I can bake pretty well. I have a knock out recipe for gluten free pumpkin pie – it’s delicious and maybe I’ll try to make that for next week’s Thanksgiving Eve! But, I’m no BAKER - not like the people who are on these baking shows. And, this particular show has a quality about it that is wholesome, quirky, and an all-around sweetness (pun intended) that makes you want to cheer everyone on.

For those of you who are unfamiliar, The Great British Baking show is a British television baking competition, in which a group of amateur bakers compete against each other in a series of rounds, attempting to impress a group of judges with their baking skills. One contestant is eliminated in each round, and the winner is selected from the contestants who reach the finals. And, unlike other shows, these contestants really love each other and have fun, cheering each other on.

Without fail, however, every contestant wants to impress a certain judge named Paul Hollywood – yes, his name is real. Paul Hollywood is a really difficult judge to please. He’s meticulous, hard to read, and he tells

the truth about what he tastes. I also get a sense that the bakers are sometimes afraid of his judgement. I can see how they struggle to have courage with some of the bakes they are asked to do. On the other hand, it's clear that Paul Hollywood also trusts the bakers to be as good as they can be and he leaves them to the challenge hoping that when he returns, they will have a product he can really enjoy. Sometimes they miss the mark. Other times they succeed beyond wild expectations. And, then when the baker does amazingly well, they get the "Hollywood Handshake". The Hollywood handshake is a rare sighting, where Paul Hollywood is so impressed with what a baker has created, he shakes their hand. Only a few bakes are worth the Hollywood handshake.

But then there are also disasters that occur for the bakers. I remember without exception an incident that occurred in the first season. A baker was having a very bad day. He had proved the dough to his bake way too long and then he ran out of time, so he under baked his show stopper. The other bakers were encouraging him and trying to help him, but he got more and more disgusted with himself as the hours went by, until finally, he threw it in the trash. He decided that it would be better to have Paul taste nothing than to have him taste a disaster of a bake. But, the other contestants convinced him to scoop it out of the garbage, and in fact, they helped him to make it look presentable, at least the ones who were also done with their own bakes.

Paul Hollywood's reaction to this whole thing I will never forget. Of course this is a paraphrase because this episode was years ago, but it went something like this: "Everyone has bad days and bad bakes. We all sometimes fail at baking, all of us. It is better to have a failure and have something to show for it than to have nothing. If you go home today, it's likely going to be more because you gave us nothing, than that you gave us your best effort that just happened to flounder today."

Slide: Parable of the Talents

I know. This is a very long example of a story. But, I want you to think of this story from the Great British Baking Show as a reimagining of the parable Jesus tells in today's Gospel from Matthew.

Let's just face the discomfort up front. If we take the parable to be a literal read and not a general story Jesus tells, and if we assume that the slaves are us and the master is Jesus, then we clearly have a right to be fearful. Look what happens to the slave who does nothing with the master's property and perhaps even worse, hides it in the ground while the master is away. He is thrown out into darkness, separated from the master. And, this is not a master that is likeable at all either.

At face value, this is stark and fearful indeed. Is Jesus telling us that if we don't use the gifts he has given us to use for the sake of the master, we will be thrown out into darkness where there will be gnashing of teeth? Will we be up to the challenge Jesus lays here, or will our complacency and fear be our own undoing?

And yet, it's not the only parable Jesus tells that are like this story. In a summation of Jesus' teachings here in this chapter of Matthew, he tells a series of three parables. The parable prior to this one in Matthew's Gospel is about a group of bridesmaids, who in waiting for the bridegroom to come open the gate for the wedding banquet to begin, fall asleep while waiting for him. And then when the bridegroom comes, only half of them have enough oil in their lamps to see their way to the party, while the other bridesmaids are shut out by the bridegroom because he can't recognize them without their lit lamps. The ones who are prepared for the bridegroom enters into joy while the others into darkness.

And then, after the parable we hear today, Jesus tells a parable about when the Son of Man who when he comes again, he will separate those faithful sheep that fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison from those unfaithful goats who did not because they did not see *HIM* in the neighbor they were meant to love and serve; Again, in that story, outer darkness to those who fell short. You will hear more about that story next Sunday.

What do we make then of all this? Actually, when teaching about these parables to confirmations students and adults alike, I like to remind people that I'm pretty sure that Jesus intends to shock us in these stories so

that we will listen. We will perk up our ears waiting for some hope, and in listening, we will hear a clear message of what Jesus does hope for us and expect of us not merely as individuals, but as a community.

Jesus tells eye opening stories not merely for the punchline, as we also know that we have all over this Gospel a Jesus who comforts and blesses his followers. But Jesus tells these stories so that it is clear how followers of the way of Christ are to follow, how they are to respond to the message of the Gospel, and what they are to do with that message. And, because the attributes of a disciple include more than one behavior, he tells many stories. So, in a sense, we are never meant to hear these stories apart from each other, nor are we ever to pull them out ONLY as the one example of the life of faith. It is within the context of the whole Gospel.

The previous story in Matthew of the bridesmaids is about being prepared for Christ to come. The story of the sheep and the goats is about the compassionate life of the disciple. And, today's story is about courage – the courage to be daring with what God has given you to use in your life. It is about having courage to fail and to know that even failure is an investment and, ultimately, is better than no investment at all. In today's world, when we are so fearful, hearing this message of courage is I think essential. We are a fearful people. That is no different today than it was in Jesus' time. And, the desire to sew fear in our world is also easy. This parable of Jesus in a world where we are told to be afraid really speaks to the now.

Slide: Courage/Fear

So, what kind of daring would Jesus have in mind for us? Not the hasty, careless kind, but rather the wise, productive sort, the kind of courage and boldness that surveys a situation and with hope and imagination – invests resources of time, money, and talent in ways that multiply the goodness of God in the world. As Jesus says in all these parables - the kingdom of heaven is coming, indeed even now is dawning and breaking in.

Jesus is encouraging us to have courage in our proclamation, our living out the bold life given to us. It is not something that, when we feel, we just dump in the garbage, afraid of our failures and just giving up. Jesus would have us try again and again until the day he comes.

And, how do we do that? Well, I think the Apostle Paul helps us in our first reading from 1 Thessalonians: *“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”* Let me say it again: *“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”* As the people of the Thessalonian church grew weary of waiting for Christ to return, Paul reminds them to keep awake by helping each other. Support each other and encourage each other. That is how you continue to keep bold. You pick each other up and continue forward with the gifts God has asked you to use, even risking failure, and we all know that failure is an option in our discipleship. But, that is better than never have dared at all. And, in fact, it is expected by the master. We work towards that Hollywood Handshake, the goodness of the one who says, “well done, good and faithful one!”

Slide: “Therefore Encourage”

Our task then is to be fearful to use what God has entrusted to us. God calls us to this kind of daring life, not only as individuals, but also as communities, as the community of St. John’s. And, best of all, God does so with the promise of entering into the joy of the master.

Amen.