

It is good for us to be together this morning.

Well, we are five Sundays into this. I feel that now it is finally time to share some things with you about myself, that perhaps I didn't feel secure in telling you up unto this point in our relationship. You may have guessed something about it from the children's sermon. But perhaps for the benefit of my own soul and yours... I need to locate myself for you on the atlas of nerdy things.

While I did study theology both in my undergraduate and seminary careers, I don't consider myself a "theology nerd".

Do the names, Tom Bombadil or Radagast the Brown mean anything to you? How about Frodo Baggins, or Samwise or Gandalf... perhaps we are getting warmer. I enjoy fantasy epics like Lord of the Rings and the Chronicles of Narnia... yes that locates one hemisphere of my nerdy pursuits.. I enjoy these stories and others because they remove us out of the humdrum of our everyday lives and transport us to an exciting realm of adventure and possibility. But it is not all fun and games. The characters get stuck, they despair. They come up against unfathomable evil. You see, the dragon I was telling the children about has a name. In the prequel to Tolkein's epic, there is a dragon named Smaug. We don't need to get even fully into the story, mainly because many of you know it already, and those who don't should read it without spoilers. But we don't have to go far in the story to find out what Tolkein is trying to say about dragons and what they mean.

"Dragons steal gold and jewels from men and elves and dwarves wherever they can find them; and they guard their plunder as long as they live, which is practically for ever unless they are killed and they never *enjoy* a brass ring of it. After there is no one left alive, they take all the wealth for themselves for that is the dragons way, piling it all up in a great heap to sleep on for a bed. They carry people off at night until they are all gone, and no one lives near a dragon anymore."

You see, dragons represent the monster of bottomless appetite and accumulation. Dragons embody the fear of scarcity and most of all greed. And left unchecked, it destroys the neighborhood, and cuts off the dragon who will never enjoy or unlock the vitality of wealth. Money only has power if it is used, spent for enjoyment, saved prudently and purposefully, or given away. The best the dragon will ever have is a lonely bed on an uncomfortable pile of reminders of how he drove everyone away and he cannot dream in the restless sleep of the smouldering fear of never enough.

Well that was fun. What on earth do the sad fate of dragons and those who live near them have to do with today's Gospel lesson? At face value it seems like a straightforward teaching about greed and where we place trust for our security in life. And it is all those things. I don't need to be a theology nerd or a fantasy nerd or any kind of nerd to figure that out. So I guess we can all go home since we have it all figured out.

The state of the world out there tells me that we don't have it all figured out. That maybe we missed something or are looking the other way, or maybe this one doesn't apply to us. Actually

it doesn't. The first hearers of Jesus' message here would probably not be able to even comprehend the level of wealth that we enjoy today. These were people for whom the expectation of daily bread was really a fervent prayer and the receiving of it a true miracle. They might have a spare set of clothes. But one disaster, one unfortunate incident is all it would take to make them completely destitute, utterly dependent on charity or worse having to sell themselves even their own bodies into slavery.

Jesus words connect with us today on the same issues, but we have multiplied our worries and anxieties about the future. We are worried about college funds, 401ks, even the very economic systems on which our society operates seem to be at risk. How dare you Jesus, ask me not to look to you for validation, or to make some sense of what I ought to do in this mess. Now just as then, Jesus looks us dead in the face and says, "Friend, who sent me to be a judge and arbiter over you?" We do not get off that easy. We have come asking Jesus about an inheritance, a sense of what we are entitled to, a question of what exactly is it that we deserve. Inheritance in the mind of the 1st century Jew had to do with much more than money. It drove down to the level of basic identity. Who am I Jesus, if I don't have what I am entitled to?

Jesus sees the glowing eyes of the dragon flash across our faces, and he is determined to quench our destructive fire-breathing before it starts. He says, "Take care, be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." We are the person in the story who has come to Jesus seeking validation and vindication with regard to our inheritance. We are so off base in our question, we have forgotten what we have learned from Jesus so fully that he has to tell us a story to remind us how wrong we really are.

First of all, Jesus begins his parable by de-centering us. We have come to him with only ourselves as the main concern. Right away Jesus starts the story not with the main character, but with his land. The *land* of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. Farmers will tell you that no matter what you do, how well you care for the crops, there is a certain amount of it that is out of your hands. I knew a priest one time whose first career was working his family's farm in Mississippi. When people would ask him about his previous experience he would reply, "There is a lot of money in farming... I know, because I put it there." But Jesus is reminding us from the very beginning that perhaps we don't bear as much responsibility for our own wealth as we might like to think.

The rich man in the parable when faced with a bumper crop, with an unexpected windfall of resources that at best are the result of a mix of his effort and circumstance lining up... immediately turn to his self-absorption, fear, and anxiety for the future. What will happen to me—as the wrongheaded passersby of the Good Samaritan story thought. So he doubles down and rather than figure out some way to share the wealth, he takes a risk to build a bigger hoarding place to hide his treasure. The scales are already growing over his skin and the leathery tail and wings are beginning to sprout before our eyes. In placing his security in what he is able to accumulate for himself, he is robbing himself and his neighborhood of the vitality of the wealth. It is curious to me that Jesus tells the story in this way, it becomes a dialogue of self-deception. "I will say to my soul, there is enough, eat, drink, and be merry." Jesus does not say, there was enough, so the man ate, drank, and was merry." We can say all sorts of things to

ourselves, we can blow smoke through our dragon nostrils atop a well-fought for hoard of treasure, but it won't be so. The voice of truth will not stop, we have not considered the time which grinds along. We don't know how much time we have or how much others have. The dragons seem to think they will live forever until they die.

The kingdom of God which Jesus just taught us to pray for to anticipate coming in its fullness to us here on earth, in McMinnville doesn't work that way. I am not suggesting that we have a house full of greedy dragons here this morning, hoarding our resources so that we can prop ourselves up in the community... So we can buy an identity that can make us look like somebody in the eyes of our friends and neighbors. The evidence I have seen simply does not hold up to that assumption. I see generous people here who give of their time and their treasure for the mission of this church. But in general the world doesn't reflect that attitude. There are dragonly forces at work which perpetuate the myth of scarcity that flies in the face of the Gospel. We do not live in a predominately dragon-slaying culture, economy, or even town. But I want to highlight some of the bright spots, the Gospel good news this morning.

Remember those people, the ones for whom one little disaster or poorly-timed illness, or family collapse... any one of those things might send them spiraling into a life of poverty or homelessness. I have seen those people here in our neighborhood. I was honestly shocked at the numbers of people experiencing homelessness and substandard living conditions here in McMinnville. I went out two Sundays ago to deliver meals with Margaret and Zach and Charles to these folks and it was an education. I tell you it was hot that day. Getting in and out of the car had me drenched with sweat. It was only a taste of what those living in tents, baking in the sun in their cars, or living alone in one room.. it was only a fraction of what they face. These are the people who live near the dragon, being carried off one by one so no one notices. The effects of personal mistakes and systemic failures find them bearing the brunt of a culture of greed and indifference.

I went yesterday to see children who don't have what they need to go to school. Whose clothes were dirty and hair messed up or unkempt. It was hot yesterday too. Parents were herding their children outside. Perhaps generations of people who have fallen through the cracks and don't know another way to be in the world. Who are so preoccupied with trying to get by or self-absorbed in addiction or whatever situation they find themselves in that the kids have to leave the house to find food.

I said that there was good news. I said that I have received an education. And for a minute I succumbed to my education being limited to the depths of hopelessness and feelings of the people in front of me simply being a lost cause. I said that we don't live in a pre-dominately dragon slaying town, but there are some. You know some of their names, some of them are sitting right here who continue to show up. Who prepare a meal, who carry it out into the woods, who help kids with their homework. Who go to just about every church in this town and band together to make sure kids have a backpack or a haircut or the smile that a snow cone produces on a hot day. These folks are slaying the dragon one little bit of shouting good news into the dark at a time. When we pray your kingdom come, it is such activity we are mobilizing our faith toward. The dragons think they will live forever, until they don't... as God's will is carried out courageously and faithfully on earth as it is in heaven.