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Luke 21:5-19
 Malachi 4:1-2a
 Psalm 98
 2 Thes. 3:6-13

November 17, 2019
 The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

This past week I went foxhunting...for the second time on my horse, River. Let me put this into context...this has been a 20 year dream of mine. For 20 years I have hoped and waited for my chance to get out in the field on a horse of my own and gallop through fields in a fancy black coat and perfectly shined boots. My vision was idyllic, the girl and her horse taking on the world.

The reality, however, was more like this...

Me (coming up on a very deep creek bed): Just walk in slowly, sit up straight, easy does it right to the other side. That's the plan.

River: Grab on tight because I'm going for it!

Me: Oh no, you don't! We are going slow just the way I planned. Wait. Wait. Not yet....Oh my Lord! He's leaping out of this ditch. Lord help us. (I look up.) Oh No....there's a tree right in front of us. River, you had better slow down or I am going to die.

River: (Ignores me as he gallops at full speed, zig zagging through the trees)

Me: Seriously, there's another ditch....and a pipe, and a hole. I can't!!! I am not going to make it out of here alive!

River: This is the best day EVER!!!! Let's go faster!!!

Well, you can imagine the words running through my mind. Needless to say, the childhood vision of eternal bliss on horseback was quickly overcome by terror while dodging tree branches and holes and hounds as we flew through the woods at brake neck speed. When we finally stopped I wondered why in the world I would ever put my life in such jeopardy. What happened to the lovely pastoral image of my little girl imagination? This wasn't lovely. It was a morning full of grit and sore muscles, a pounding heart and frazzled nerves. It was holy terror on four legs.

And...guess what...I'm doing it again next week!

I was taught growing up that anything worth having is worth working for. That means going back time and time again when you are tired, when you are afraid, when you have messed up and gotten broken down. That's when you dust off your boots and keep going...even when you doubt that you will ever be able to get it right.

Sure I could choose a safer hobby, one that keeps my feet safely on the ground. But, what would that do to my dream? What example for my kids would it set if I gave up and said the work is just too hard?

There are two lessons I want us to focus on from my experience: conviction and commitment. These are the central elements in a work ethic that we all need to take to heart. In fact, it's a work ethic that Jesus proposes in our Gospel from Luke. A work ethic that he outlines as not only important but essential to our livelihood and to humanity as a whole.

It's a rather grim scenario that Jesus paints for the disciples as he sets up this lesson. Jesus tells them that times are going to get hard, really hard. There is going to be fighting and disasters. There is going to be sickness and persecution. It will feel like the problems are insurmountable. You are going to want to give up. But, Jesus tells them, you have been given strength because of your faith, a strength that will help you overcome the challenges you will face. Believe that your faith will make you strong. That's the lesson of conviction. Believe it.

Then, notice that Jesus doesn't tell them that they can take the easy way out. He doesn't give them an excuse to give up and stop trying to make the world a better place. Instead, he says that the difficulty they will face will give them an opportunity to be an example of good faith, to testify, to proclaim victory in the midst of certain defeat. Jesus says it's going to take endurance. In other words, when things get tough they are going to want to stop, to put the brakes on, to wait until a better time. Jesus, however, says, hang on...we're going for it. Be dedicated to your faith. That's commitment. That's dedication.

And guess what? Jesus then reassures them...you will be just fine.

Conviction and commitment, the great elements of Christ's work ethic.

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul is encouraging the church in Thessalonika in their work ethic and he provides them an even more direct explanation of this teaching. Simply put, Paul says do not be weary of doing what is right. Keep at it. There is simply no excuse for you to be idle when there is good work, important work to be done. You can't just sit around saying you are a follower of Christ. You've got to do something with that belief. You have to be dedicated.

Faith doesn't call us to be fearful of the world around us. It doesn't call us to turn around and go home. A deep abiding faith in Christ reminds us that there will be obstacles in front of us. There will be divisions and hatred and suffering. Faith, however, calls us through them to be an example to others of hope and strength. Of conviction and commitment. And it reminds us that the world, can indeed be better.

I look around, as I am sure you do as well, and I see a world full of tension, where people have forgotten how to move through conflict and disagreements with grace. Instead, they dig in their heels, cross their arms, and put up a wall to anyone who is different. I used to get upset at this kind of resistance to working together. Now I see it as a protective mechanism...a way folks

have begun to operate in their lives because it has become too scary, too uncertain, to let down their guard and listen, and love, and learn. So instead of moving through hard times, they just go home and give up until a day it will be easier.

The result, we continue to distrust one another, to fear one another, to doubt one another's good intentions. We aren't letting faith guide us. Instead, fear has overcome us.

If Jesus were here right now, he would remind us, like he did the disciples that reconciliation is tough work. It will be uncomfortable at times. It will be risky but it is absolutely necessary.

For us to have the kind of courage we need to be a light in the world in times like this, we have no other choice but to have conviction and commitment to our faith. To believe what Jesus teaches and to be dedicated to being faithful through our actions and our words. To never tire of doing what is right.

I believe Grace Church has that conviction and commitment. I believe we have the foundation to shine a light on unity, peace, and reconciliation. And, folks, the world needs it. The world needs you. This is no time to be idle. Anything worth having is worth working for. Amen.