

NOVEMBER 19, 2023
25TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST



St. John
United Church of Christ

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Fairview Heights, IL
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Rev. Rosemary Captain

Prayers and Liturgy by Rev. Lavon Bayler

Next Sunday is Totenfest when we will celebrate the lives of those who have passed in the last church year; Darleen Bax and Nancy Schamberger Smith.

ANGIE HAUSMANN is preaching this Sunday. So I'm sending you my service from 3 years ago. rc

***RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP:**

ONE: Lift up your eyes, seeking to know your God.

Attune your spirit to the One in whom we dwell.

MANY: God's love surrounds us here today.

God calls us to be children of light.

ONE: We belong to the day when we have faith.

We live confidently in the hope of salvation.

MANY: We seek to be faithful to the best we know.

We want to invest the talents God gives us.

ONE: Faithfulness gives us a sense of greater abundance. Doing justice adds to our sense of worth and dignity.

MANY: We are here to build up one another.

May our worship encourage each of us today.

***UNISON PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

Fill us, gracious God, with a sense of your abiding presence. Awaken our spirits to realities unseen. Turn us from the dullness of our fear-filled grasping for security and help us to live with trust in you. Expand among us such mutual regard and encouragement as will build up community and lead all of us to live in the light. May faith and love

dominate all our relationships as we enter into the joy of serving in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

SCRIPTURE: Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. ¹⁵ To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant’s ability. Then he left on his journey.

¹⁶ “After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins gained two more. ¹⁸ But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money.

¹⁹ “Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, ‘Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained five more.’

²¹ “His master replied, ‘Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

²² “The second servant also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I’ve gained two more.’

²³ “His master replied, ‘Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You’ve been faithful over a little. I’ll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.’

²⁴ “Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. ²⁵ So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what’s yours.’

²⁶ “His master replied, ‘You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven’t sown and that I gather crops where I haven’t spread seed? ²⁷ In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest.

²⁸ Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. ²⁹ Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don’t have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. ³⁰ Now take the worthless servant and throw him out into the farthest darkness.’ “People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.”

MESSAGE: “Living Out the Gospel Truth”

Today we have a parable that needs some explanation and clarity. It is intended to be taken allegorically. That is, each major element in the parable is a symbol for something, and Matthew’s readers are supposed to be able to “crack the code.”

You may recognize this as the Parable of the Talents, as translated in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. When we hear the word “talent”, we think of gifts such as hospitality, cooking, or musical talents that can be shared in a congregation.

However, that is a misinterpretation of the word. A “talent” is actually a large sum of money, typically about fifteen years’ wages for a typical worker. The CEB translation we have today uses the words “coins”. That’s better, but we have to think of large solid gold coins, not pennies. I would say the worth of each talent/coin in this parable as about a half a million dollars in our world today; so, our eyebrows are raised when we think of their worth.

Yet, as allegories go, the coins are symbolic of something else and in this parable the expensive coins are symbolic for the gospel, the message brought to us by Jesus and who is trying to, once again, share with his disciples and followers what the kingdom of heaven is like. This parable is asking us what we will do or not do with the gospel.

The two “good and trustworthy” servants symbolize all wise and faithful disciples who hear

Jesus’ words and act on them. The third servant who is called “wicked and lazy” is a living embodiment of Jesus’ warning that “everyone who hears those words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand” (Matthew 7:26).

The reason it is wise and trustworthy to act on the gospel is not simply that Jesus said so but disciples need to learn to be obedient and to follow orders. Living out the gospel truth of mercy, peace, and forgiveness is wise because the future belongs to God and those are the values of the future. The master will return, (the promised kingdom is coming) and its advent will render all the false values of this age obsolete.

Sometimes we look back on the anger, the harshness, the indifference toward others in our past and say, “If I had only known then what I know now, I would never have done it.” One purpose of this parable is to say that we **CAN** know now what we will know in the future. What will stand at the end is the gospel and nothing else, and it is true wisdom to live out today the truth of God’s future.

There is one more lesson that we can learn from this parable. Note the trembling speech of the one-talent servant: “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man . . . , so I was afraid” (Matthew 25:24-25.) Now, up to this point in the parable is there any basis whatsoever for this depiction of the master? Absolutely not. From what we can tell, the master was an extraordinary man – trusting, welcoming,

generous, and benevolent. Clearly, the one-talent servant distorted the master into a rough uncaring despot, and has foolishly acted accordingly.

The master in this story is symbolic for God. So, the question is **what kind of God do we serve?** This tragic news of this parable is that the one-talent man pronounces his own judgement; he gets the peevish little tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about **living with the consequences of one's own faith.**

If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life and can discover the joy of God's generosity everywhere. That's what the last line of this passage means. "To all those who have, more will be given . . . but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Matthew 25:29).

Read the parable again and see what you think.

These words of Jesus give us much to ponder. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Bright as each morning you come to us, crafter of manna. Your grace rests gently upon us, waiting to be gathered, to become the bread of life we share throughout the day.

Renewed as compassion's justice, you come to us, Servant of the poor. Choosing to give as you desire, you show us the last, so we can make them first

in our hearts and hopes. Doing no wrong, you make us right with God for all time.

Spirit of uninterrupted grace, you come to us. When we would feel abandoned, you give us the gospel to live out; when we would protest, you teach us songs of praise; when we would utter laments, you fill us with God's laughter. And we are grateful for all these gifts and blessings you give us, gracious God.

Today we add prays for what is happening in our world. We pray for the people of the United States as we work towards equality and civility for us all. May we greet our neighbors that we disagree with, with love and willingness to compromise.

We pray for the healthcare workers and first responders who have put their lives on the line to protect us. We have special prayers for the families who are dealing with loved ones who have been injured or killed by violence. Give strength to the sick and to those who are struggling with separation. All these things we pray in the name of your son, Jesus who taught us to pray . . .

THE LORD'S PRAYER:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but

deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

THANK YOU FOR SHARING YOUR OFFERINGS:

UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION OF OFFERINGS:

There is no escape from your judgment, O Spirit of Holiness, but neither can we flee beyond your limitless love. We offer an accounting of our stewardship in and beyond the offering of this day. Reshape our lives for joyous, responsive participation in work that builds up the body of Christ. Use what we offer here to bring encouragement and hope to many who have lost a sense of meaning for their lives. Bless us and our offerings. Amen.

RESPONSIVE COMMISSION AND BLESSING:

As another week unfolds, continue to look up.

Dare to invest yourself for the sake of others.

God will go with us to uplift our spirits.

We will pass on to others the encouragement God gives.

Live as children of the day, children of light.

Keep awake, sober, and full of faith and love.

God's saving grace is a healing force among us.

God's trust in us helps us to trust others.

Listen for God's commendation and affirmation:

"Well done, good and faithful servant."

We will seek to be worthy of that award.

May God bless our worship and our service.

Amen. Amen.