

2 Corinthians 9:6-10 ~ Matt. 25:14-30

Risking Power

24th Sunday after Pentecost ~ November 15, 2020 ~ 2nd of 3 Stewardship Sundays

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Second Lesson:

“Then the kingdom of heaven will look like this.” That’s how Matthew 25 starts, and our starting point again, on week two of our 3-week journey through the 25th chapter of Matthew that I am calling our “Apocalyptic Training” series. Jesus is pointing us to the future which God intends, revealing truth that teaches us how to live differently today. The purpose of the warning and the judgment in this chapter is a call to action now. We are being trained how to live in the light of God’s future and be a people who bring us closer to God’s kingdom on earth. Jesus is calling us to be “Apocalyptics.” Today we get our second training session.

It’s been another long week, so I will remind you: last week our story was the “Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids” who had to wait longer than expected for the bridegroom. A dark story that pops at midnight when the delayed bridegroom finally appears, and a crisis occurs for the five bridesmaids whose lamps have gone out and they forgot to bring extra oil. Their fatal error, however was not their lack of preparation. Their biggest mistake was that they left. They mistakenly thought they had nothing and were worthless since they were out of oil. Not unlike the way Jesus’ disciples, the very next night, would lack the staying power to stay awake with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Last week was all about “staying power.” An “Apocalyptic” has “staying power.”

Today’s story, the Parable of the Talents, is about “risking power.” I see an immediacy in this parable for Jesus telling it to his disciples two days before his crucifixion. Although he warned them, they would choose to play it safe and desert Jesus, fleeing into the night when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this parable, Jesus is also anticipating what his followers would need to do when he is gone. At the point when Matthew wrote down this story in his gospel narrative, we can see Matthew letting Jesus’ parable teach his post 70 CE readers, what it takes to be a Christ follower after the crisis of the Temple’s destruction. And for us today, reading this gospel lesson in the waning days of 2020, we still have much to learn from this parable of God’s abundance and our choice to risk or deny it.

Sermon

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” How many times have we prayed, or will we pray this prayer, while at the same time wondering what’s for lunch, or by how many points will the Packers beat the Jaguars this week? We all do this from time to time, but beware--when we do, we bury the treasure and deny the power of this petition. It is easy to forget, or take for granted what God has given us and what God is asking us to do with that gift. Just as each person in today’s parable was given a unique but abundant gift, we have all been entrusted with gifts by God to fulfill this very prayer.

Thursday afternoon, when I was with Tom and Shirley Forbish in their living room, we prayed the Lord's Prayer out loud together, slowly as he lay on a recliner, under a fleece blanket made years ago by their daughter Jan, with oxygen helping him breathe, and medication to ease the pain. We didn't know, maybe Tom did, that this would be his last day on earth, and this would be our last spoken prayer together. But it took on the power of the inbreaking Kingdom in that moment. I believe Jesus gave us this prayer, to help us to remember each day—from when we first learn the Lord's Prayer as children to our dying day, that we have work to do and the means to do it. All of us. We are called to share God's presence, God's grace, our unique way of helping God's kingdom to come on earth, and not to be afraid.

If we let our fears drive us, we make bad decisions and the kingdom grows more distant on this earth. "*So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.*" (Matt. 25: 25). The response of the third slave is at the heart of our "Apocalyptic Training" in today's sermon. The third slave's utter misunderstanding of God grew into a fear that was so large, he could not see around or through it. His fear actually prevented him from even beginning to understand the gift that was his to claim or deny. What about us? *So I was afraid*, and I chose to stick with what is, or what was, and not with what could be in the future. The power of risk is the power of the Holy Spirit revealing what could be and giving us the will to make the changes that vision requires of us. Yes, to be an apocalyptic, requires risk. Especially when we are pulled kicking and screaming into new possibilities we never asked for.

Back in March when we had to instantly shut down our church for in-person worship honestly, *I was afraid*. The very work I had been trained and ordained to do and have been doing for 28 years, had to change. And quickly. Now what? I could not imagine what our worship would become. Or how we could continue our mission at FPC without meeting together, working together, having fun and fellowship together in this building, the way we love to do. In March, I was only vaguely aware what Zoom was, and up to that point had consciously resisted the use of screens and recordings in live worship for solid, Presbyterian, theological reasons. But that was then. Being an "apocalyptic" can begin with being afraid. It can begin with what we know and believe in the present. But it must not end there.

As we launched on this path of discovery, (through trial and plenty of error, I hesitate to remind you of those first shaky attempts at Livestream worship in March) I hoped this was temporary blip, was an aberration that would be in our rearview mirrors by Easter. Yet here we are in mid-November imagining how to record meaningful and inspiring remote Advent and Christmas Eve services. Thankfully, God has led us on this risky path beyond our imagining. Due to creative, talented folks on our worship team, and to your generosity--we have come a long way since March. Every week we strive to improve and innovate. Looking just ahead, we are on well on the path with new ways to stir our spirits and lift our hearts as we anticipate the coming of Jesus here in 2020.

When you received the pledge letter from our Finance & Stewardship Committee this week perhaps your first response was something like, "*I am afraid, I don't know what to pledge, so I maybe I won't.*" Making a pledge is always a risky move. We never know, for sure what is

going to happen tomorrow, next month or next year. That is always true. And yes, this is the week, in preparation for next Sunday, Nov. 22, we are asking you to do just that. To think, and to pray, to talk with your family is you are making a joint pledge how much of your income you will give for the work of God's kingdom for a whole year. But the year ahead is 2021. And let's be real: we already 249 days deep into the COVID-19 pandemic, that seems to be getting worse, not better here in Wisconsin and our nation. After a record-breaking week of 160,00 cases in one day, Thursday: it's even harder to look into the future with certainty. Will we still have a job, or be able to find one? Will we get COVID? Will we get a vaccine? In addition to COVID, right now we are also living in the "interregnum" period between the election and the January inauguration, causing political uncertainty about the year ahead. What state is our democracy truly in? Will the leaders we truly elected take up the mantle of leadership we all need for a time such as this? So many good reasons to be afraid to pledge this year.

A pledge is a faith statement. This is always true, but this year, perhaps more than ever. A pledge, regardless of the amount, is our way of saying to God, "Thank you for all you have given me. Thank you for your Kingdom, your *Regnum* (Latin word for Kingdom) which is never an "interregnum." A pledge for 2021, is a faith statement and a prayer. A pledge for 2021 is your way of saying, "*Your* Kingdom come, *your* will be done: therefore, here's what I will risk for you, for spreading and multiplying your Divine Love. A pledge is your way to say, "Yes, I want to be part of your multiplying kingdom, and will say "no" to the dividing and division that diminishes and derails our hope of healing this world you came to save. (And yes, your pledge, unlike a contract or invoice, can always be altered at any point in the year as your circumstances change.)

Let's think a little more about why the third slave received such a harsh judgment. It was *not* because he spent it foolishly, like the prodigal son in the parable Jesus told about the man who divided his property between his two sons in Luke 15. Here's the surprise: the third slave in today's parable is condemned because he did nothing with it at all except to hide it. It is taken away because he refused to risk *anything* at all. "So I was afraid and I hid *your* talent in the ground. Here, *you* have what is *yours*." (Matt. 25:25) You can hear his refusal to connect in any way to the gift the master had given him. For this, our play-it-safe guy received a judgmental volley of insults "you wicked and lazy slave!" And then was literally given the boot, *thrown* into the bad place: a land of endless weeping and serious dental distress.

It seems like Jesus is saying: burying your talent, pretending you don't have it, is worse than squandering it on wine, woman and song. Here's where the apocalyptic warning light goes off: If we do nothing with what God has given us, if we bury it alive, we will be judged for committing a sin as grave and weighty as murder. The choice is ours. We have the ball. Will we play offense or defense?

I have good news for you today about the Kingdom of God, and good news about our FPC Community. God has given us a kingdom of multiplication: where five talents become ten: 100 years' worth of wages becomes 200 years of wages, where five loaves feed 5,000 hungry people. These crazy, extravagant numbers hint at the untold, the untapped power of risking for

Divine Love. And we have folks right here at FPC: individuals and groups who are taking the ball and running with it for a touchdown. We have folks, as groups and individuals who are letting God's gifts be multiplied through them! Too many to name in my sermon today. Here are just two.

Our Creating Connections Team brought an idea, a seed of an idea, to the Deacons that multiplied and increased almost overnight: Their talents for creativity, working together, and working hard blossomed into an all-congregation delivery of treats this week: to show we are thankful for you! Multiple deacons and others stepped up to the call to help with the delivery and now that seed will produce a harvest of delight and righteousness this very week! Look forward to having a "Thanksgiving elf" leave something on your doorstep, to say thank you for being you and for the gift you are to all of us.

God gives each of us a unique set of gifts. For one person in our FPC community its wheelchair ramps and shower grab bars that he installs, tirelessly and sometimes almost instantly all around town. Yes, this is a shout out for our own Don Zais, who was just awarded the Jefferson Award this week. In addition to all the ways he has been keeping our building and grounds in shape at FPC, Don has also been foreman for over 15 new homes and refurbishments through Habitat for Humanity. In addition, he has been an active participant in AARP, doing taxes for those in need. Don is an inspiration for us all on how God's gifts can multiply in one person's life. This kingdom abundance is planted in every one of us: we each have a unique set of talents that God has given only to you to further the coming of God's kingdom.

Yes, this is a parable of judgment. To ignore this aspect of it would limit the fullness of what Jesus is teaching here. The Greek word for judgment, *krino*, means to separate, judge or decide. At its root is also the word for crisis. I find this helpful: at points of crisis we are forced to make judgements that define who and whose we are and we will be judged by them. The Final Day of Judgment in the Greek New Testament is "hemera kriseos." At the same time, each day is a day of judgment as daily crises drop into our laps and call us to decide whose kingdom we really serve. In this parable, our Apocalyptic Training lesson for today, I hear Jesus saying we will be judged: not by our grades in school, not by how popular we were, not by our income tax bracket, or size of our house, but on what we did or didn't do with what God gave us.

Did we risk for Divine love? That's what an apocalyptic does. We pray that God's kingdom would come, one ramp, one treat bag, one abundant pledge, at a time. So that God's will, would actually be done on earth, as it is in heaven, because of us. Let us pray and do with all our hearts, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."