

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY X - GO ANYWAY
Ordinary Time

Matthew 25:14-30

A Sermon Preached by
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University Congregational United Church of Christ
Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

Matthew 25:14-30¹

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

Pastor Catherine Foote

Will you join me in prayer.

God,

May the words we share

May what we hold in our hearts

Be welcomed in your sight, our gracious God. – Amen

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Old Testament (adapted). ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY X - GO ANYWAY

Nothing like ... Oh ... Nothing like a text on weeping and gnashing of teeth to welcome me back from sabbatical, right? So what I discovered when I returned from sabbatical just a few short weeks ago was that you had been spending all fall talking about leaving. Here I come home. I should've brought a suitcase with me, right, because you've been talking about leaving. You've got your luggage here. You've got your signposts posted. You have a flock of migrating birds overhead. The conversation is about leaving; but not just about leaving. It's about what we take with us.

So here I am back in this congregation celebrating the 25th anniversary of my ordination. But I have to tell you, in order to get to that day 25 years ago, I had to leave home too. See, I was part of a very conservative Christian denomination that taught very specifically that women did not become preachers, that we would not be ordained, and even – *even* – if a woman might be ordained there is absolutely no way you would ordain a gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgendered person. I was taught that Scripture forbids me to stand here. I had to find a way to leave home.

Now the grace of that denominational teaching, in addition to teaching me to take the Bible literally, was that they also taught me to take the Bible seriously. And when I had to choose between that tight, literal understanding of the text and the gracious open loving hands of God that the text brought me back to over and over again. I knew which one I had to let go of; but I tell you, as we know, the letting go is never easy, is it?

We all walked by wolves to get here.² Beautiful. And here we are in this gracious space, but oh! we know the wolves. We know the wolves.

Which brings us back to today's text. Isn't that an amazing story! We've heard a variety of interpretations. You know they're out there. The first one is the most simple. It takes the word talent and it turns into "gifts." The word talent actually means money. It's a kind of coin.³ It's like gold. But in English we can easily get confused. We think talent might mean how we speak or how we sing.

The truth is that this text, written to the early church that is sharing its stories of Jesus, is all about what happens when you're ready to leave and you're ready to go and all of a sudden you can't figure out where you packed God. Where did God go!? And this story says, "Well, God said, 'I'm off. Take care of my stuff while I'm gone. I'll be back!'" God left and here we are, as the story goes. But he left us with some stuff and our job is to take good care of it. That's the traditional translation. And the better care you take of God's stuff, the more you will get rewards when God gets back.

And I have to say, you know, that's an option. That's a, that's a nice understanding. It gets us busy with stuff, right? And it's an understanding that works as long as the system is working for *you*. Right? It assumes that if you just work hard enough you will get ahead, and if you are not getting ahead, oh, you lazy and foolish servant – slave, it says.

² Reference to words in anthem of the day, "Grace before Sleep", words by Sara Teasdale in line 6 of the poem written in 1931. See End Note. The line was repeated in the music.

³ "Most important, a denarius was a hired laborer's wage for a day's work.¹⁵(Matt. 20:2.) On that basis, a laborer would have to work for 6000 days to earn one talent." From *Bekahs, Shekels, and Talents: A Look at Biblical References to Money*, By Richard Tice (Asst. Ed.). Accessed 1/17/2018 at <https://www.lds.org/ensign/1987/08/research-and-perspectives/>

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY X - GO ANYWAY

I tried that interpretation of the text. I worked hard where I was. Until I discovered that no matter how hard I worked, this story couldn't be told that way in my life.

Well if you have been fortunate enough to be a part of this congregation on a regular basis for a few years, you'll know that Amy Roon brought us another interpretation of this text – which I absolutely love. She suggested following some scholarship on this story, that the hero of the story is actually the third person. And the third person who put the gold in the ground and said, "I just buried it away," is the person who said, "I refuse to cooperate in this abusive system." – "I refuse to cooperate in this abusive system. You want your gold. Here it is. You can have it. I buried it and kept it safe."

Power to the people! [*chuckle*] Yes! I like that interpretation. I think that interpretation can give us a place to stand and some food for thought. It makes the hero the one who risked *everything* by risking nothing and refusing to cooperate; and don't you know, sometimes those are the ones who, indeed, are cast out.

I can live with that interpretation, but there is a third interpretation that has given me life. And here's how that story goes.

The two folks who did well, well they did well; that's fine. The third person was so afraid that that person could not even risk moving out into the world. What was the person afraid of? The master. Or another theological way of saying that is that person was afraid of God – the God we are supposed to understand who rewards and punishes and woe be to us if that God sees us worthy of punishment. I *know* that small God. I've lived with that small God. And the mistake of the third person was not to bury the gold in the ground but to be afraid in the first place. That person was taking one thing so *literally* that she forgot to take God's love seriously.

I'll tell you when my fear broke open. It was when I learned to take God's love seriously. When I refused to be the one who saw God as a tyrant, *reaping* where God does not sow, *asking* for what God has never granted in the first place. When I learned to know the God of love, I found the courage to let go, to drop the baggage, to step out. There to greet me were the arms of the United Church of Christ. Well, a lot of you know that that's my story, and I love that story; it's why I'm here.

Well, let me tell you last summer while I was away on sabbatical a friend of mine gave me a call. She said, "My son is coming to school in Seattle and we would love to spend some time with you." Now this was a friend from about 45 years ago. From *church* 45 years ago. Not only was this a friend, she was the daughter of one of my professors in an incredibly conservative school. In fact, he was the one who said, "If you're having trouble with women just get 'em married off and they'll be okay." He literally said that. Okay? His daughter's son is coming to Seattle, and wants to meet me, and hear all about my ministry. Huh! I'm starting to pick up some of my baggage again, hold it close to me. What will I say?

Then I met Sam. And Sam told me about his own upbringing in that very conservative home. And he told me about the very conservative college – like mine – that he had gone to. And at that very

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY X - GO ANYWAY

conservative college, Sam started a poetry slam. and he got up in front of that community and he read this poem, called "Boxes."⁴

It may as well have been yesterday,
not because I remember it,
it's just that when I pray
I mostly have trouble knowing exactly what I'm trying to say
because the wrath that binds me has only caused me to stumble,
and suddenly I'm exposed to the light of day.
But whose day are we talking about here?
It was on that day, the one I don't particularly remember,
that I offered up my life in complete surrender to a box.
A wise man once told me you can't fit people into boxes
unless you break them.
But he never certified which was being broken,
because the simple metaphor he had spoken was two-dimensional
and thought but 3-D in notion.
Is it the cardboard, fragile?
Or the people, flesh and bone so easily shattered?

So about this box.
This box was a god – lowercase, mind you.
This god, which was a box, folded me and twisted me.
He told me I wasn't enough.
He blinded me from the beauty,
the only thing that could possibly let me see.
This god-box gave me a list of people to hate.
He taught me how to discriminate,
eliminate the ones he would most eradicate,
the preconceptions I had made about my nation-state.
He put me at the tippy top of his holy hierarchy.
As a straight white male he gave me authority
And yet somehow he made me still feel like nothing.
My flesh and bones and heart he made habit of breaking.
I fit perfectly inside my box-god
but not until I was worn down, devoid exhausted.
Now I hear you saying,
"Come on man! like you've ever had to overcome anything."
You're right!
I don't need to reiterate my privilege or expound on my affluent heritage,
but I will say this:
one day my lowercase god, which was a box, broke.
One day I saw the light and something else spoke.

⁴ Sam Koekkoek, 2017. Seattle, WA. Available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVyuL4HGJ8M>

LIGHT FOR THE JOURNEY X - GO ANYWAY

No. It was some *one* but it wasn't just a man
and it was certainly no box. No.
One day the uppercase God made Herself known
and taught me how to love
and showed me which seeds needed to be sown.
That day I learned how to mutually surrender.
That is a day I remember.

Sam told that poem in a place where he could have been kicked out of college for it. Sam knew something about God, and then he looked at me and he said, "Do you think my grandfather would be proud of me?"

Folks, we're on a journey. And this is what I know about journeys. Every one of us is carrying our baggage and every one of us when we learn to take the God who is traveling with us, that God of love, that God who fits in no box we have constructed to carry along with us – When *that* God is traveling with us – *any* one of us, even Sam's grandfather, even Sam, even me, any one of us can drop the baggage and journey on with the God of love.

Thank you.

END NOTE:

ANTHEM sung by UCCUC Choir, Led by Heidi Blythe
"Grace Before Sleep"
Poem by Sara Teasdale (1894-1933)
Music by Susan LaBarr (2011, Santa Barbara Publishing)

How can our minds and bodies be
Grateful enough that we have spent
Here in this generous room, with thee,
This evening of content?
Each one of us has walked through storm
And fled the wolves along the road;
But here the hearth is wide and warm,
And for this shelter and this light
Accept, O Lord, our thanks to-night

Poem written by Sara Teasdale, Thanksgiving 1931, while visiting friends. Information from *Sara Teasdale, Woman and Poet*, by William Drake (1989, University of Tennessee Press), p. 278. Accessed on <https://books.google.com>, 1/17/2018.

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Transcribed by Beth Bartholomew from www.universityucc.org/Sermons/2017/12/28/2017