



**Westminster Presbyterian Church**  
Eugene, Oregon  
“At Home” Worship  
November 15, 2020

*Gathering Around God’s Word*

*If you are worshipping with another family member or with children, you are invited to have different voices share and read the various parts of the service. You can also call/FaceTime someone to worship together.*

*(If you have a prayer request you would like added to the At-Home Worship service, please email Brooke office@wpceugene.org)*

**CALL TO WORSHIP**

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations:

**you have been our home throughout all the ages.**

You were there before the world was made and will be forever.

**From everlasting to everlasting you are God.**

**OPENING HYMN**

God Whose Giving Knows No Ending

#716

**CALL TO CONFESSION**

God’s love has destined us not for wrath, but rather for salvation. Therefore, let us confess our sins to the One who is eager to save.

**PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Loving God, we confess that we have sinned against you by not honoring you or one another. When we place our iniquities before you, it is your love that sheds light on our wayward deeds. As we stand before you, we ask your forgiveness through the mercy of Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

**DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS**

Sisters and brothers, when we acknowledge our human limitations and turn to depend upon our everlasting God, we grow wise in heart to God’s commands. You are freed to love one another, for your sins are forgiven by the mercy of Christ. Amen.

*The Word*

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Come, Holy Spirit, open our minds and hearts this day, that we may be illumined by your Living Word and walk together as children of light. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

*Old Testament Reading: Psalm 90:1-12*

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night. You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers. For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days pass away under your wrath; our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger? Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you. So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

*New Testament Reading: Matthew 25:14-30*

"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.'

SERMON

"Betting Our Lives"

Rev. David Ukropina

There's a frequent connection made between today's parable told by Jesus about the talents and the theme of stewardship and the season of stewardship in the church. There's a very common interpretation of this passage as being about giving at church, and it's not random that these verses come to us in November when many churches plan their stewardship campaigns.

In this interpretation, the talents of the parable are compared to talents that people have at church. It's likely that the word "talent" actually goes back to its usage in this parable. We read the parable of the talents and hear the message to the church and to Christians that we should devote our talents, our gifts, and our resources to support the mission of the church.

But this is not the only possible reading of this parable or focus for a sermon. Many commentators have noted that this passage has a lot to do with eschatology, or the end times, as do many other passages in this later part of Matthew. In this reading, the master leaving and then returning is comparable to Jesus leaving the disciples and then returning at the end of time.

Personally, this is now the third time I've preached on this text during my ministry both here and elsewhere. The first time, my sermon was more of a traditional stewardship interpretation. The second time, I focused more on the relationship between the master and the slaves. This time around, I plan to focus on both of these things, but with a slightly different understanding of what stewardship is.

Going back to the parable, I've mentioned before that it's important to look at the relationship between the master and the slaves, especially the third slave. In the passage, we can look for clues as to the character of the master. This is important when we consider the reactions and decisions of the three slaves.

First of all, the master is very trusting. He gives each of the slaves talents, which scholars believe were worth an enormous amount of money, probably close to fifteen years' worth of wages for a typical worker. To place that much trust in the three slaves is evidence of a trusting nature.

Second, slaves at that time were simply expected to do their jobs without receiving any praise or support from their masters. Yet in this parable the master gives a lot of praise upon them, telling them "Well done good and trustworthy slave", and then the master invites them to enter into the joy of their master.

Based upon these clues in the parable, we and the slaves could discern that the master is trusting, welcoming, generous, kind hearted, and wants what's best for those around him. The master also allows for initiative and independent decision making among his slaves, rather than being overbearing or dictatorial.

The first two slaves take an accurate view of the master. They see him as trusting and loving, otherwise they would not have taken the action and the risk of investing. The third slave

however develops a very warped view of the master. He calls him a harsh man, even though he has no basis for this claim.

The master then says that even if the slave thought the master was harsh, he still could have invested the money with bankers and gathered interest. This would have involved a very low amount of risk, but in the slave's view of the master, there is not even room for this smallest amount of trust or responsibility.

When the master banishes the third slave to the outer darkness, some readers find this a harsh sentence, but I've mentioned before that it's really the wicked and lazy slave who brings this upon himself, due to his own warped view of the master and of reality. As it's been said, very often the God we face is the God we imagine.

As we turn from the parable to our own lives as Christians and as parishioners, we can see the connection between the story and stewardship, though through a different lens than the simpler interpretation about us giving of our talents to the church and to God's mission in the world.

When we look at the three slaves, they are being called to make a decision that is based upon what they can tell about the character of the master. Some decide the master is kind, loving and trustworthy, and so they make an investment, which always comes with risk, based upon that relationship. The third slave also makes a decision based upon a very different view of the master.

As well all know, any important decision is a risk. Financial decisions and investments are certainly risky. Money managers will often tell clients about the rule of 72, which determines how many years it would take to double your money. For example, if you get a four percent return on investment, you divide that into 72, and it will take 18 years to double your money.

What they will also tell you is that the higher the rate of return, the higher the risk. Any investment is risky. Any big decision is risky. Someone once told me that everything worth having in life involves a risk. We can see this if we go through all the big decisions a person might make.

Getting married is a risk. Think of all the things that could go wrong. Two people could fall in love but later grow apart. They could stay in love, but one gets sick and dies. Or they could stay together and really struggle. Still the joy of a good relationship is what potentially makes the risk worth it.

Or think about having children. Think of all the things that could go wrong. Kids could get a horrible disease or have all kinds of other threats to their health and well-being. Someone once said that when you are in love, it's like part of your heart is walking around outside your body, leaving you vulnerable.

Even owning a home is a big risk. I remember when we bought our first home, the very first night we slept in our bed, I had a dream that I had left the keys to the house sitting in the lock of the front door, and anyone could just come right in. I'm sure my subconscious was expressing the anxiety I felt about being a first-time home owner.

In a way, being a Christian is a risk. After all, we could be wrong. We have bet our faith on our sense of God's existence and what God is like, but what if we're wrong? Being a church member can definitely be a risk. We are giving our effort, our time and yes, our money to the church, but what if it gets wasted somehow? Or what if other parishioners or pastors disappoint us, something that will inevitably happen anywhere we go.

So why do it? Well, like the slaves in the parable, we are betting based upon our sense of

the master, or in our case, based upon what we know about God and about Jesus. We are basically betting our lives and our behavior upon the nature and character of Jesus Christ as we meet him in life and in the gospels.

And we learn from Jesus that the biggest risk of all is in not caring, about God, about others, about life. That is like being banished to the outer darkness. Sometimes we church people can think about our faith as a kind of safe security, but really, faith is a high-risk adventure of following Jesus through life.

So as we think about Westminster and both our individual lives as parishioners and our collective life as a church, what is Matthew's parable telling us today? I hear it telling us that if Westminster sees and discerns and believes in a generous and loving God, then it will risk being generous in response, both in our personal lives and lives of faith.

Now that sounds like a typical thing to hear in churches and in stewardship campaigns, but it is not an easy place to get to. Think of all the things going on that can make us anxious, and possibly pull back on our generosity. It's still 2020, there's still a global pandemic, there is the election we've all been through, there is economic pain. There are lots of ways to get very worried very quickly.

And yet if we take a big step back and look at the sheer fact of existence, there is a lot to be grateful for. Just look at the beautiful color of fall leaves, and do not take them for granted. Look at the beauty of nature, especially here in Oregon. Look at our families, our friends, or going back to the sermon two weeks ago, those saints who have nurtured our faith.

As a church, and as Christians, we are called to resist being permanently afraid, and to resist forming a worldview based on fear and anxiety. We are called to risk our lives betting upon the character and nature of God's love, and to be faithful, both in what we do as individuals in this world and as the communal body of Christ.

What we think and feel about God and what we do in response is not a trivial thing. Sometimes people and culture can look at church as a trivial and marginal thing. But the decision to be a Christian and to be part of a church is not trivial. It involves real life choices and a real fight. And our greatest treasure is knowing what this all means, and sharing it with others.

If I were to ask my "So what?" question in this context, I would simply say, do not fear. We do not want to live like the third slave, not so much because he failed to invest his talent in a way that benefited the master, but because he lived with a world view that saw the master, that saw God, and that saw the world as a harsh, threatening place, and he lived in fear and paranoia.

Stewardship is not ultimately about giving money to the church, although that is part of it. Stewardship is ultimately about belief and faith and our conclusions about God. It is about living our lives based on our conclusions over the character of God, and living in a way where we feel alive in our faith, more like the first two slaves than the last.

It can be easy to fall into fear. There is so much that we can get afraid of, from the economy, politics, diseases, problems in our families, or problems in our churches. But the main message I hear from our text is for us not to give into fear. To live generously. I've mentioned before to members of each year's nominating committee that the number one thing we look for in new officers is a "generosity of spirit".

As we all move into the future, in society, in church, in our lives, I invite you to base your decisions and actions upon what you know of God's character. What have you learned about God during your life, and how do you want to respond in kind? The witness of the church is to testify to the love and grace and generosity of God, and to proclaim that to the world. Amen.

AFFIRMATION OF FAITH – Apostles Creed

**We trust in God, whom Jesus called Abba Father. In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community. But we rebel against God; we hide from our Creator. Ignoring God’s commandments, we violate the image of God in others and ourselves, accept lies as truth, exploit neighbor and nature, and threaten death to the planet entrusted to our care. We deserve God’s condemnation. Yet God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child, like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful still. Amen.**

*Responding to God’s Word*

#### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE AND THE LORD’S PRAYER**

Holy God, you welcome us into your joy and entrust us with your gospel. In hope for the world to come and with love for the world you made, we offer our prayers for your church, your earth, and your people...

We pray for your church, in this community and around the world, that your good news may be proclaimed to all...

We pray for oppressors, that they might know justice, and those oppressed, that they might know peace...

We pray for your creation, that we may be the caretakers you intend...

We pray for the young, that they might be nurtured in love...

We pray for the old, that they might be secure in your care...

We pray for those who face death, and those they leave behind, that they might be comforted...

We pray for all those who care for the suffering and those in their charge, that they would be freed from pain and fear...

We pray for those about whom we worry and those whose troubles are known only to you...

All this we pray with gratitude for your eternal love and grace, in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray, saying... **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy 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 thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**

*Sending of God’s Word*

CLOSING HYMN

*Our God Our Help in Ages Past*

#687

BENEDICTION

And now may the Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other.

-Genesis, 31:49