

November 15, 2020 (Focus: Matthew 25: 14-30)

Jesus was many things: son, brother, friend, healer, inspiration, prophet, example, and teacher. As teacher we encounter him today, teaching about his favorite subject: the kingdom of heaven, or more specifically, what it meant to bring the kingdom of heaven here on earth. As teacher, when Jesus was looking around for ways in which to teach about who God was and who we were to be as the people of God, and Jesus was searching for a way to get these ideas across to those who would listen, well, he didn't have google, he didn't have the internet, he didn't even have the local library's store of books to fall back on for references or examples.

So, without these resources, and knowing that his followers didn't have these resources either, he used images that he knew they would know and understand in order to teach about who God was and who we were to be as the people of God. That is why so many of his parables and stories have an agricultural feel – people in his time and place would understand about mustard seeds and the lilies of the field and the swallows of the air and how farmers usually sowed seeds and why that extravagant sower of seeds would have been so unusual.

So again today we encounter Jesus the teacher, offering up a parable, one about planting and harvesting, and what it meant to be the people of God. As usual with parables, there are so many layers here; let's peel off one or two of them to find some good news today.

One of the layers to uncover in Jesus' parable today is this strange sort of "crop" being planted and harvested here. To one servant is given five talents, to another two, to another one, each according to his ability, we are told. We hear "talents" and think it is about those gifts each of us is given, gifts of music or art or math or science or writing or so on, and indeed our use of the word comes from such an interpretation of this parable. But back in Jesus' time, they would have heard this parable and thought about money. A "talent" back then was an amount of money, a large amount of money, more money than someone, even a wealthy landowner, might have seen in a year. For a servant, one talent would have been more than they might have seen in a lifetime.

So to be given one talent, let alone two or five, would have been an extraordinary thing. As the parable goes, the man "entrusted what was his to each of his servants." What a strange thing for someone of much riches to do. Two did something with what was entrusted to them, the other did no damage to what

was entrusted to him, didn't lose it, but also just buried it, did nothing with it. A strange sort of planting, to say the least, to bury treasure, and in risking nothing he gained nothing. In gaining nothing for his master, he gained nothing for himself as well. He had his reasons, he thought, for not wanting to risk anything, his master being a harsh man, "reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed"; the servant was afraid. Fear is a powerful factor in our lives, and it can keep us stuck where we are, not willing to risk even for good. We see this in our world, fear keeping people from speaking up against wrong, because they won't risk the consequences. Keeping a position, and the hope of potential favors, are more important than speaking out against wrong.

What are we willing to risk for the sake of the gospel? God has risked much, but giving us free will, by calling on us to help build up the kingdom of God here on earth. What are we, as a church, as a faith community, willing to risk for the sake of bringing the good news to the world? Much was risked for us to be here, as folks from First Congregational Church and Pilgrim Congregational Church came together and risked resources to plant a seed of hope here on Atwood Avenue that became known as Plymouth Church. Much was risked to stay here after two different fires in our history, especially after the second fire in 1968 when others said it wasn't worth rebuilding, but some brave souls said, no, we have roots planted here, and the roots are strong, and there will be yet more fruits of the spirit that will be harvested from these roots. Much was risked when this congregation made the public declaration to be open and affirming of all, when it was not as fashionable to be so. We've risked in other ways, letting a fledgling personal essentials pantry find a home here, giving space for many groups to meet in our building when other churches turned them away because it was too costly to open their doors during the week. We risked being one of the first congregations in our Conference to declare itself immigrant-welcoming.

I was reminded the other day of another time in which some risk was taken by this congregation, or at least by some in this congregation in our name. It is a small example, but one that exemplifies who we are, I think. Carol Walker mentioned this during the Wednesday morning chat this past week. She reminded me of how earlier this spring, not too long after things got shut down and we weren't sure how long restrictions would last, that it was time to plant the garden behind the church. Just a reminder: the garden is planted back there for the food pantry at the Goodman Center; all the produce is destined for that food pantry. As Ann Lacy, the head gardener, and her eager assistant Carol Walker, and there might have been others involved too, as they were getting ready to sow

seeds, they knew that the food pantry was not accepting any food donations, canned or fresh, due to the pandemic. As they sowed the seeds, they didn't know if they could donate the food to the pantry or not, but they sowed those seeds anyway. Apparently, Ann just said, "We'll figure something out." Risking the seeds and the effort, for the sake of hopefully being able to help others in the future. As it was, by the time most of the harvest was ready, the food pantry was accepting produce from gardens again, and were grateful that fresh food would be available for families in need.

We do that in this church, we don't know if people will attend a meeting, or join a bible study, or help with a project, or log on to a zoom worship service, but we try it anyway, we risk something – time or talent or humiliation or ego – for the sake of holy experiments, which is really for the sake of sharing the good news to others. We risk starting each year not assured that we have enough income to pay all the bills, and by the end of the year we have somehow managed and we have done a whole lot of good in the community and shared the good news of Jesus Christ and God's love in word and deed. We keep doing this, without full assurance, except to hear our teacher Jesus say "fear not." We keep doing this, for God has shown us time and time and time again that God loves us, and that we can trust in God. We keep planting the seeds, and nurturing the roots, and pruning that which no longer is viable, and we keep harvesting bountiful harvests of hope and love for ourselves and for a world in need.

God has been extravagant with Plymouth, giving us much riches in terms of a mighty cloud of witnesses who came before us, and great people called to join us, and many many talents, including warm compassionate hearts compelled to love God and love our neighbors. There is much to fear in our current circumstances – a pandemic that threatens friends and family and keeps us physically apart, the secularization of society, competing views on how to follow Jesus that turn some away from the church, lumping us all together in one pot. But Jesus says to us "fear not," and so we are called not to bury our talents but to use them and good things will happen, including amazing growth, in us as well as in the kingdom of God. Yes, in some things we should exercise some prudence, as part of being good stewards of what we have been given, but in wisdom not in fear. And in courage we are called to risk much, for the greatest gift we have been given, God's love, is a gift made real in the sharing, sowing it extravagantly, with God's help.

Let us turn our hearts and minds to God in prayer. Creator God, gracious God, we are grateful for your love each day, a love that sparks our own loving to the world. We rely on your gracious mercy in these days, for we can feel so raw in our emotions. There is so much going on that stokes our fear or our sense of despair. But then someone offers us a kind word or gesture, and we are reminded that your Spirit is indeed always at work, and we are strengthened and encouraged.

We are coming on especially difficult times for us, for the holidays are soon upon us. We usually have great plans for such times, traditions to uphold, meals and gifts to share, but most importantly gatherings of family and friends, and for many of us such gatherings will be out of the question this year. We do not want to risk our own health, but as important we don't want to risk the health of others. And so we are beginning to understand that things will be different this holiday season; traditions and gathering will have to be paused for this year, and we grieve what we will lose because of this. We will miss much. But your Spirit is strong, Lord, and we feel it encouraging us to withstand the loss for the good we are doing, and we feel your Spirit inspiring us to find new ways to connect for such a time as this. We will still give thanks, for there is much to give thanks for even in these times. We will still wait and prepare a way in the wilderness, and we will still celebrate the coming of Emmanuel anew to us. And we will do so assured that you will be with us in these seasons.

There are so many among us, in our community, and in the world suffering in body, mind, and spirit, in need of your healing compassion and care – grant all in need an experience of your renewing touch, especially...

Bless those for whom the isolation is weighing on their mental and emotional well-being. We hold in our prayers today especially all those working in area health care facilities – hospitals and nursing homes and first responders – for they are feeling the strains of the rising COVID cases. Give them strength, and grant them rest, and keep them well.

Moment of silent meditation...

O Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Fill us with your patience, hope, joy, strength, courage, love. Help us to remember that it is through us that your love and mercy flow, that your hope and a vision for a peaceable community of mutual respect and caring will be made real, as was taught to us by the one we call teacher and Savior, who taught us to pray to you saying, Our Father...