

Seize the Hope (and Ring the Bell!)

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

24th Sunday after Pentecost - November 15, 2020

Texts: Psalm 123, Hebrews 6:18-20, Matthew 25:14-30

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

RESPONSIVE READING adapted from Psalm 123 and Hebrews 6:18-20

To you we lift our eyes, you who are enthroned in the heavens!

In you we take refuge; we seize the hope set before us.

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the Beloved, who always has mercy;

So in you we take refuge; we seize the hope set before us.

Have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt.
Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn
of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud;

But in you we take refuge; we seize the hope set before us.

You are our hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,
a hope that enters the inner shrine, the holiest of holy places,
where Jesus, before us and for us, has entered to approach you.

In you we take refuge; we seize the hope set before us.

Matthew 25:14-30 *Today, we hear one more parable told by Jesus, the parable of the talents. Nowadays, we use the word "talent" to refer to special inborn abilities, but the parable clearly speaks of talents as money. In the Old Testament, a talent was the highest measure of weight, used to calculate an amount of gold or silver. In Jesus' time, it meant the value of that weight of money. One talent of silver would weigh about 75 pounds, and be equivalent to 20 years' wages. Adjusting for inflation, possessing five talents would arguably make you a multi-millionaire. Jesus intentionally uses hyperbole, or exaggeration, to make his point about the astronomical value of what is entrusted to the servants. While Luke also tells the story, the cheery conclusion to the parable is pure Matthew.*

“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.’

To undertake to learn a new skill in one’s maturity can be a valuable exercise in humility. For me, it’s handbell ringing. I modestly confess to some natural musical talent, honed by decades of singing and playing the piano. Bell ringing is *so* different. Other ringers dexterously manage four or six bells. I stand there with my single bell per song, waiting for my turn. I can hear where it will fit in the harmony, I listen for the melody heading down, bell after bell, toward me. But if I don’t ring my bell just right, the beauty of the song is broken. I’m not an expert ringer. Yet. Sometimes my bell rings out jarringly loud, sometimes too soft to be heard. But I am the only one who can ring it. If I miss my cue, that note is forever lost, and the magic of the music is diminished. It’s a lesson in humility, and an exhilarating challenge, thanks to director Judy’s encouragement and the kindness of the other ringers.

There are natural abilities and there are skills. Best of all is when natural abilities are skilled into perfection, given a chance to blossom and flourish and inspire others. Jesus’ parable paints a glowing picture of those who took the money entrusted to them and doubled it through smart trading; and a grim response to the one who took his single talent and buried it. We’ve become accustomed to using this familiar story to encourage stewardship of our time, treasure, and, of course, talents. And, as today is stewardship Sunday, I officially approve of that interpretation.

But I invite you to think outside the box a bit. Our culture places a high value on personal achievement and success. “Make the most of yourself!” we are told. “Be all that you can be.”

The biblical outlook is much more communal. What you achieve, you achieve for all. Instead of individuals with talents, think of societies entrusted with resources, and how they use, abuse, misuse, deny, or bury those resources.

I'm specifically thinking about structural valuations in our country. Racism. Sexism. Heterosexism. White male supremacy. The systematic legal suppressions and the toxic *tacit* assumptions that have buried the god-given abilities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Also women, LGBTQ people, differently-abled, and neuro-diverse people. True, slavery's been outlawed for 155 years. Redlining for 52. But gerrymandering is still alive and well (and no one side has a monopoly on it!). And it took 100 years of women voting to get a woman elected to the second highest office in the land. Problems linger past their sell-by date.

I live in a sturdy house, built in the 50s: shiny hardwood floors, real plaster walls. Last summer we found that not only were we getting water in the basement, but the foundation was bowing in. We had to have those walls shored up and tiling put in to manage the water. The expense seemed astronomical to me, but if we hadn't done it, our house wouldn't be worth much in a few years. We weren't responsible for the problem, but we are responsible for fixing it. But cracks in the foundation, rot in the beams, lead lingering in the paint are ignored at a homeowner's peril. That's something like the hidden structural flaws in our society.

What I'm reading and learning is painful to me, and you know the last thing I want to do is cause you pain, too. No, actually, that's the second to last thing. The last thing I want to do is to hide the truth. And the truth is that all of us who are part of the dominant culture benefit from white privilege. The less we are aware of it, the more we probably benefit. I realize I talk a lot about my time in a Black church; but I think I learned more there than anywhere else in my life. Here's one more incident seared in my memory. The basement of Holy Family Lutheran Church was occupied by a Headstart program nationally recognized for its close observation of the social behaviors of young children exposed to violence. Ms. Wilson, the director, was tall and slender, with regal bearing, and elegantly tailored suits; she was highly educated, widely respected. I used to go down just to watch the bright open faces of the kids, and learn from the gentle strictness of the teachers. One day I was talking with Ms. Wilson when some official came in with a question about the program. The man came straight up to me, totally ignoring Ms. Wilson. Why? I was the only white person in sight. I was also the only adult present who couldn't answer his question; yet I was the one he appealed to. I was horrified, and embarrassed.

Here are a few non-personal examples of talent and skill succeeding despite the odds: Satchel Paige, one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history, never played in the major leagues until he was 40 years old, an age when most players retire. Singer Marion Anderson's amazing talent and exceptional skill won international acclaim and personal friendship with people like Albert Einstein. Yet she was denied entry to many American hotels and restaurants. In 1939, she was

barred from performing at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. A decade before, when the Nazis decided to embark on their program of racial purification against the Jews, they came to America to learn how to do it. It was apparent to them, and to much of the world, that this country, the land of the free, led the world in legalizing the denial of freedoms to some.

I'm convinced that if we were to dig into the basement of our country, we would find the buried talents of millions of people: enslaved people beaten nearly to death for learning to read, free Black men hanged or burned alive in front of cheering crowds for the crime of being seen as "uppity." We would hear whole generations crying out, "I can't breathe." Numbers reveal how issues linger, as Black babies are more likely to die in infancy, Black mothers in childbirth, Indigenous teens of suicide, Indigenous women to go missing, Black men to be killed at the hands of police, and all people of color more likely to die in the covid pandemic.

Few stories are as dramatic as those of white on Black violence, white on Indigenous genocide, white contempt of Asian people in our country. But women, too, can tell tales of having to submit to younger, less qualified, male bosses or constant workplace harassment. When someone dear to me graduated with top honors from a Presbyterian seminary, they veered away from public parish ministry partly because, as a gay person, their considerable talents were not welcome in our church. That was in this century. Even more recently: some ridicule or belittle Greta Thunberg for her unswerving focus on the climate crisis. She attributes her single mindedness to what some might call a disability: yet this teenager swayed the whole world.

It's not because I despise our country or our church that I bring these things into the light today. It's because I love them both so dearly. What nation was ever built on nobler dreams? What faith was ever founded on a more inclusive vision of self-giving love? It's not primarily my love of justice that leads me to say hard things in Sunday morning worship, it's my love of God, my conviction of God's love for me and for the world. Prayer precedes politics. When the Spirit says "Speak," silence is not an option. As Christians, we have the clear example of God's design for humanity in Jesus, the Christ, the crucified lover of all, prophet of love to the left out and forgotten. How can we see and see, and yet remain so blind? What have we lost as a nation, a church, a world, by denying or burying the God-given talents of so many?

But we're not here today to lie down in despair or wallow in guilt. God is not going to cast us into the outer darkness. On the contrary, we are here to seize hope. Hope is such a versatile gift: on one hand, it's the anchor that holds us steady when we're faltering. On the other hand, it's like a kite that gives us wings to soar, to see the big picture. Hope is how people triumphed over evil laws and implacable resistance. Hope and love. Let's look at our parable from yet another angle. Instead of reading talents as money, as Jesus' audience would have, instead of thinking of talents as our own quirky abilities, think of the gifts that God has placed in each human being. Think of the astronomical value of the talents in the parable - virtually infinite riches. That's

what God has placed in you: the infinite power to love. The hope that springs eternal. The boundless opportunities to share love and hope right now, today. I'm not talking about Hallmark cards, I'm talking about the tough, gritty love that slogs through pain and risks disaster and keeps going. I'm talking about the love and the hope built into each one of you, entrusted to you by your Maker, brought home to you in Jesus, the Christ, breathed into you by the Holy Spirit.

No, we didn't make the mess, but yes, we're responsible for cleaning it up. No, it won't be easy and it won't come cheap. And we'll have to sit at the feet of people who can tell us what it feels like to be buried in the basement where you can't breathe. That may feel demeaning to some of us. We'll have to learn new skills, even if we were happy with the old ones. We may have to learn some lessons in humility. But we can do it because God, our God, has entrusted us with the talents to do this. You hold a bell that no one else can ring; but when you do ring it, you add to the magic of the music of God's glorious world. In the words of the 20th century prophet Oscar Hammerstein, "A bell's not a bell 'til you ring it; a song's not a song 'til you sing it; and the love in your heart wasn't put there to stay. Love isn't love 'til you give it away." Amen. May it be so.

Prayers

**God of all good gifts, teach us to use our talents. Help us to recognize and elevate the gifts of others. Show us where we've gone wrong; help us to set things right.

**God of every tribe and tongue and nation, help us to take our proper place in a world where all are precious and all are honored and all contribute to the good of all.

**God of wind and weather, hear our prayer for those affected by the destruction of storm or fire or changing climate. Help us to take action on behalf of our threatened earth, our damaged home.

**God who wore a human body, strengthen those laboring with covid or cancer or depression or dementia or any sickness of body or mind. Help us to be your loving presence with them.

**Be with all elected leaders, all decision makers, all charged with care of the vulnerable; help us, with them, to work for the good of all your children. When we are preoccupied with troubles close to home, help us remember those in South Africa, Nigerian, HongKong, Eastern Europe, the middle east, and every part of the world seeking peace.

**Be with those we long for in this holiday season but fear to see in person. Make your healing touch known to those named aloud and those held in our hearts. Comfort all those who grieve for loved ones lost to covid and other causes. Remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray, Our Father, who art in heaven...

I am indebted to Isabel Wilkerson's 2020 book, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, for some of the ideas presented here. In my opinion, it should be read by every American, and especially those in the dominant culture.