

Sermon – “Expectations Fulfilled”

Scripture Lessons Psalm 90:1-6, 12, Matthew 25:14-30

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Our first scripture reading is Psalm 90:1-6, 12. Psalm 90 begins with the confession of faith that God is our dwelling place. The very fact that God stands outside of human time allows God to be a place of safety for each and every generation. Moreover, because God stands outside of time the believer finds solace in a vision of things seen through God’s eyes. The believer can relax in the knowledge that God was there long before his or her journey through this world and that God will be there long after it. (Feasting on the Word, L. Juliana Claassens) Hear now God’s Holy Word.

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.² Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.³ You turn us^{b1} back to dust, and say, “Turn back, you mortals.”⁴ For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.¹² So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Amen.

Our second reading, Matthew 25:14-30, continues the series of Jesus’ parables for those awaiting Christ’s return. In Matthew’s version of *The Parable of the Talents*, unlike Luke’s, the servants each receive an incredible sum of money. One talent equals 15 years of wages, two talents equal 30 years and five talents equal 75 years. In many ways this parable is not so much about talents as it is about the third servant, the master, and the relationship between the two. Let us open our hearts and spirits to the hearing of God’s word.

14 "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. 20 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." 21 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 22 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." 23 His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." 24 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; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." 26 But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 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. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 29 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. 30 As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Amen.

The title of the sermon: Expectations Fulfilled

The text: Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master I knew that you were a harsh man...so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Matthew 25:24b-25

Let us pray. Holy God, help us to see you for who you are. Give us the courage to risk, to grow, and to live in such a way that our expectations are fulfilled. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago our Parish Associate, the Reverend Jerry Boutelle, shared with our Bible study an article from the November 2017 issue of *The Rotarian Magazine*. The title of the article was "Could be worse" and the artwork under the heading featured two gentlemen looking intently at a glass of water which was "half full or half empty" according to their facial expressions.

In the article Frank Bures writes a compelling argument that 2016 was not the worst year ever despite claims made by many on twitter. He acknowledged it is true that things feel worse than they actually are and believes part of the reason for this lies in the 24-hour news cycle and its never-ending flow of bad news. According to Jia Tolentino in *The New Yorker*, "There is no limit to the amount of misfortune a person can take in via the Internet, and there's no easy way to properly calibrate it..."

According to Bures, contrary to what one might think "violence is at all-time lows, as is the rate of global poverty. War deaths are fewer than ever in history. Nicholas Kristof recently pointed out in *The New York Times*: "2017 is likely to be the best year in the history of humanity... Every day, another 250,000 people graduate from extreme poverty, according to World Bank figures. About 300,000 get electricity for the first time. Some 285,000 get their first access to clean drinking water." Additionally, the world adult literacy rate is up to 85% and more children are vaccinated than ever before. Steven Pinker, in his 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, documents that the world is not more violent, more racist, more genocidal, or more unjust than in the past.

As we gather on this Thanksgiving Sunday and welcome new members into our faith community, we affirm that we have much for which to be grateful. We give thanks to the One, Triune, Eternal God who stands outside our concept of time and who has been our dwelling place for all generations. On this Holy Sabbath we take a much needed break from the 24-hour news cycle of bad news to nourish our spirits, to acknowledge our human frailty and shortcomings, and to affirm the good news of our faith in the God who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, the God who throughout history has provided a way when there seemed no way. Let us not forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet.

And so much of the good news for which we give thanks today has come about because of men and women in the United States and around the world who are taking risks, working diligently, and investing themselves in making the world a better place for all God's children. Ordinary and extraordinary individuals alike...some with more talents than others, however all are gifted and willing to share the gifts they have received with others.

Jesus told the parable of the talents in the middle of his own risk taking, a few days before his death. He had made the decision to leave the safety of rural Galilee and go to Jerusalem, the capital city, where the religious authorities would regard him as a threat to the status quo and their own power and prerogatives and where the Romans would regard him as a disturber of the peace.

This is not a parable about money. This is a parable about what we do with our abilities, gifts, energy, imagination, intelligence and love. In fact, this parable was so widely told that during the Middle Ages the word “talent” came into the English language as a term for God-given abilities, “gifts and graces” rather than an amount of money.

What the parable warns against is being too cautious with the gifts God has given. A self-fulfilling prophecy is defined as any positive or negative expectation about circumstances, events, or people that may affect a person’s behavior toward them in a matter that causes those expectations to be fulfilled.

*‘Master I knew that you were a harsh man...
I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground,’*

When we are afraid we tend to get tight and rigid and we hang on to what we have so as not to lose our status quo. When we are afraid we retreat rather than advance. When we are afraid we draw back and bury ourselves rather than risk investing in other people and relationships.

But faith and love demand risks—vulnerability, confrontation, and tenderness. The servants who know their Master as the One who loves and redeems and as the One who risked embracing the cross on their behalf understand that we are expected also to risk in loving.

According to the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, Former Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and Moderator of the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

“The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church’s seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity; playing it safe, investing in nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying money in the ground.”

As Edmund Burke, 18th century Irish statesman and philosopher put so succinctly: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

May we be men and women of action who take risks and who understand God’s nature: our dwelling place for all generations who triumphed over evil on the cross and who forever enables our expectations fulfilled. Amen.