

Sermon – “Confident Gratitude”

Scripture Lessons Psalm 90:1-6, 12, Matthew 25:14-27

Sunday, November 19, 2023

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

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 fact that God stands outside the human concept of time allows God to be a place of refuge for each 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 confidently trust the God who was there long before their journey began and who will be there long after it ends. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

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. So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. Amen.

Our second reading, Matthew 25:14-27, 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 this simple story, it becomes clear that what the servant does with the gift of these talents provides an important barometer to measure the core health and values of the servant. Let us open our hearts and minds to God’s word.

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants 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 servants 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 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." 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 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." 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 servant! 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Confident Gratitude

Text: ...so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Matthew 25:25

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, give us the confident trust in you that empowers us to live productive, joyous, and grateful lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The tradition of the President of the United States of America proclaiming the fourth Thursday of November as a National Day of Thanksgiving dates to President George Washington who gave his troops a day of prayer and thanks amid fierce fighting for American independence. President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed Thanksgiving a national holiday during the Civil War, honoring America's bounty and asking God to bring us together to care for one another and heal our Nation.

Each year on the National Day of Thanksgiving, we give thanks for the courage of our founding fathers and mothers who made whatever provisions they could for themselves and then they trusted God to provide on a journey of faith across the ocean to find a new dwelling place. A journey, which brought hardship, death, and loss, and yet thanks to the hospitality of the Wampanoag people, they survived. Their dream of economic and religious freedom survived with them and eventually became a reality for the generations that followed.

Each year on the National Day of Thanksgiving, we give thanks for the wisdom of the democratic government that evolved in time, for a nation that not only acknowledges the providence of God, but also respects that there is more than one way to worship God and more than one family of faith for which to belong.

So much of that for which we give thanks has come about because of men and women who through the generations have taken risks, worked diligently, and invested themselves, even as talented pilgrims and refugees who approach our borders today hope to do so in this generation. Ordinary and extraordinary individuals alike...some with more talents than others, however all gifted and willing to share and to invest 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 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, intelligence, imagination, 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 love demands risk, love demands vulnerability, confrontation, at times, and tenderness. The servants who know the Master as One who loves, as the One who risked embracing the cross on our behalf, understand that they are also expected to risk in loving...and are honored to do so.

Paul Woodruff, in his book *Reverence* distinguishes between fear and reverence. Reverence stands in awe, and awe is not the same as fear. *In fact, he says, fear of punishment is the opposite of reverence.* Fear of punishment is the first stage of moral development according to Lawrence Kohlberg. It's an important first stage, however if we never move beyond our fear of punishment, we never come into our own and become the persons God intends us to be. Woodruff shared that in his experience the people who are the most reverent toward God are the least afraid of God...and life.

I recently came across the poem "Sublimation" by Anne Michaels in my devotional reading and was struck by this phrase in light of today's parable.

*Many people have asked me about God;
my proof is manifestation, that God can be called "getting over fear."*

Be not afraid! a tender, poignant phrase woven throughout the scriptures. Be not afraid! Rather, have confidence in the One who has been our dwelling place in all generations and whose love is stronger than our fear.

Confidence is an inner strength not based on arrogance. Rather it is a sense of well-being that reflects the humility and gratitude of someone who understands what it means to be a child of God, to belong to a loving, forgiving, risk-taking, cross bearing, and generous God, in life and in death.

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 give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, ...not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity; investing in nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying money in the ground."

On this Thanksgiving Sunday, may we be people of confident gratitude who are not afraid to risk, to invest, and to share. May God give us the grace to do the things we think we cannot do and the courage to invest our talents and ourselves in one another and in community...so that when the rooks fly home, on the day we meet our Maker, we have something to give back to the One who has given us all things, the Eternal One who is our dwelling place, and the One who risked loving us in the quiet of Christ. Amen.