

That All May Have Life ... and Have It In Fullness

November 13, In the Year of Our LORD, 2005

Gates Presbyterian Church

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1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Matthew 25:14-30

Three men. A master entrusts five, two and one coins to three stewards and departs for a distant land. Two men take risks, invest these coins (called talents) and double the original amount. One man is far less sure and puts his coin in the ground to protect it against any disaster. At first, Jesus' parable sounds like a modern study in financial risk taking, of whether one should invest in bonds or take chances with more speculative stock.

Attitude. Perspective. Mindset. At times attitude, perspective and mindset impact us at the core of our being. We know the expression, "you find that for which you are looking." For the church it goes like this: if you look for hypocrisy that is what you will find, but if you look for grace you will find that instead. If you look for Judas, you will find him, but if you look for Jesus and those who emulate our LORD's ministry and mission, you will find Christ.

With that in mind, I reread our lectionary passages from 1 Thessalonians since mid-October and the 25th Chapter of Matthew that we started last Sunday, heard today and complete next Sunday. I found that for which I went looking! All of those passages could be read in two completely different ways! In 1 Thessalonians, Paul speaks of the "persecution," "shameful mistreatment," and "great opposition" suffered by Christ's followers. In today's passage, Paul writes of there being "no escape" from the "sudden destruction" the children of darkness will endure. How easy it is for some to preach on the hell the unrighteous will experience for their faithlessness!

Now let us think of how words in Matthew 25 could fuel messages of damnation with fire and brimstone! Carol Anne spoke last Sunday about the five so-called "foolish" bridesmaids barred from the wedding feast because they weren't at the door when it was first opened as they had run to the dealers to purchase more oil for their lamps. Those five bridesmaids were rejected by the bridegroom with the same haunting words Christ will tell the unfaithful at the end of time: "I do not know you!" In next Sunday's passage about the final judgment, the unrighteous, those who ignored the plight of the hungry, thirsty, strangers, sick and imprisoned, are told how they "will go away into eternal punishment." In today's reading from the middle of that chapter, the "lazy and wicked slave" who hid his one talent in the ground was "thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Oh what fodder that is for those who want the church to condemn, to find Judases in its midst, find ways to cajole the faithless, and perhaps even revel in the message [said mockingly] "we're going to be in heaven and you aren't" motif.

In fact, Paul's letter to the Christian in Thessalonica is actually full of encouragement and praise for the work of the men and women in that early church community. The last three verses from that fifth chapter are very telling as they present a more optimistic tone. As we reject the hand-wringing, pessimistic, "we aren't getting it right" message that some are determined to glean from Scripture, we hear those positive words again [1 Thessalonians 5:9-11]:

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.

What a contrast! What an invitation to go back and reread Matthew 25! With a different perspective, we celebrate that five of the bridesmaids *were* ready for the bridegroom and were invited into the wedding feast, that two of the slaves used their talents in *good* and *productive* ways and were *rewarded* for their efforts. Next Sunday, we remember that those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked and visited the sick and imprisoned, that those called righteous are welcomed into eternal life!

Hear the invitation to receive God's words in a positive, uplifting and affirming perspective that invites us to be persons of optimism, love, grace, faith and hope! I know the words "stewardship of time, talent and treasure" are not always received in positive ways. I suspect people who read the "tea leaves," who knew that today's congregation would "get" the year's "Stewardship Sermon," had mixed emotions. Just talking about this sermon caused some people to roll their eyes, audibly groan, or act in various ways as though today's message was a "necessary evil" we undertake each year to cajole, convince and otherwise persuade people to give more and more so that more tasks can be completed and an even larger budget can be fully "subscribed."

Well, anyone who had angst – or who has experienced some fear in the last few moments – can relax. While true that the Budget Committee presented a big challenge two weeks ago and while it is equally true we hope people will take all of this seriously enough so as to be all the more intentional in their giving of their time, talent and monies, there are a couple of reasons why this "stewardship sermon" will be anything but what the pessimists and handwringers might expect.

The first reason is that over the past year people have responded faithfully to God's grace in wondrous ways. There were all too many circumstances that challenged us to accomplish ministry and mission in God's name. There were many opportunities, some planned, and some obviously not so, to share our resources with others and challenge the scope of our stewardship. We responded with monies in times of disaster, those born of nature's fury and that of human brokenness. People in Guatemala, central Asia, Jamaica, New Orleans and Florida benefited from the generosity of people in this congregation. It fell to us to heal the wounds of families who experienced the loss of loved ones, those who faced extraordinary medical procedures, and on behalf of two fragile children who lost both a mother and a father in one senseless act. This congregation responded with prayer, help, meals, gifts, time and yes, money. Hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, a heart in need of replacement, and the tragedy of a life taken were beyond what we could possibly have anticipated for this year. Nonetheless, we, like the people of Thessalonica, encouraged and built each other up, like the better stewards, put our talents to good use, and, mirroring the redeeming act of Christ, did our best to make sure that people who lost so much could be put back on a path that might give them a semblance of provisions if not the fullness of life we strive to ensure for all of God's people.

This past Monday, some of us were at Cameron Community Ministries when the new entrance with a lift and new set of stairs was dedicated. The plaque on the wall pays tribute to the major contributors to that effort and right smack in the middle is the name of the *one* congregation whose stewardship played such a major role: Gates Presbyterian Church. Years from now, people will wonder how Cameron's ministry and mission could have been accomplished without

being fully accessible to everyone. The major role that this congregation played in making that a reality speaks volumes of how we consider it essential that all of God's people have equal access, not just to the lower level of Cameron Community Ministries where so many meals are served, but equal access to all of God's gifts which so many take for granted and so that so many others still seek: economic opportunity; justice; peace of body, mind, heart and soul; full acceptance regardless of race, ethnicity, age, language, religion – and all other distinctions that make us unique and special but sometimes become fodder for bias and prejudice.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s stewardship theme for this year is based on Jesus' words in the second half of John 10:10 – "I came that they may have life, and have it in fullness." That phrase comes at the end of a section where Jesus distinguishes himself from those leaders who would rob and steal. That which follows is a portion of Scripture where Jesus calls Himself the "Good Shepherd." For the sake of context, here is the whole of the tenth verse:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it in fullness.

Again, we witness the dichotomy of which I spoke at the beginning of this sermon. Once more we get to choose between the negative or the positive, between villainy and goodness. Do you remember how we started? Attitude. Perspective. Mindset. At times attitude, perspective and mindset impact us at the core of our being. Here is the choice found in John 10:10: allow negativity and pessimism to steal, kill and destroy or give room for goodness and optimism, the grace, hope and joy that is ours in Christ's invitation to embrace the fullness of life!

Pessimism is nurtured when the world's harsh realities rob people of their personhood, rob people of hope and rob people of opportunity. There are daily realities that cause people to hurry and scurry from home to job or school to recreation, cause five "foolish" bridesmaids to flee to the dealers to get more oil at the very moment they should have joined a wedding feast, that convince a poor scared servant that the best thing he could do with his one meager talent is bury it in the ground, ... and daily realities that persuade people to hoard what they have because they are convinced they live in a world of scarcity. When that occurs, it is as though a thief has succeeded in coming to steal, kill and destroy.

Optimism, on the other hand, is nurtured by our faith in a God Who loves us enough to send an Only-Begotten One that we might be saved, that we might enjoy the gifts of reconciliation, salvation and redemption and that we might return the favor by acting in reconciling, saving and redeeming ways. Faith is rewarded as to the five "wise" bridesmaids, to the faithful stewards who stepped out in faith and invested talents entrusted in their care, and when we respond in faith to the needs of people. Optimism is mirrored with all of the mission and ministry we accomplish in and from this place we call Gates Presbyterian Church.

If you look for Judas, you will find him. If you look for Jesus and those who emulate our LORD's ministry and mission, you will find Christ. I look at you and see people who accomplish in the name of Jesus Christ. I am grateful to be in your midst, to be part of this church's journey, and to join you in embracing God's gifts of grace and hope and faith. We know that in pooling our resources of time, talent and treasure, we can do anything, we can meet any need, we can achieve any goal, and we can bring faith-filled fullness to our lives and that of so many more!

Amen.