

WORSHIP OUTLINE - NOVEMBER 15, 2020

COUNTDOWN

OPENING SEQUENCE

OPENING VERSE (Laura)

Psalm 118:27-29 (CEB)

The Lord is God! He has shined a light on us!

So lead the festival offering with ropes all the way to the horns of the altar.

You are my God—I will give thanks to you! You are my God—I will lift you up high!

Give thanks to the Lord because he is good, because his faithful love lasts forever.

PRELUDE

Sing Praise to God Ye Sons and Daughters

by Jason Krug

Handbells

ONLINE GREETER (Bruce F)

HYMN

Morning Has Broken

Morning has broken like the first morning
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird
Praise for the singing
Praise for the morning
Praise for them springing fresh from the Word

Mine is the sunlight
Mine is the morning
Born of the one light Eden saw play
Praise with elation, praise ev'ry morning
God's recreation of the new day

READING (Rachael)

The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

OFFERING

SPECIAL MUSIC

Harvest Song by Dix and Davis
Chancel Ensemble

To thee O Lord our hearts we raise
In hymns of adoration
To thee bring sacrifice of praise
With shouts of exultation
Bright robes of gold the fields adorn
the hills with joy are ringing
the valleys stand so thick with corn
that even they are singing

And now, on this our festal day
Thy bounteous hand confessing
Upon thine altar Lord we lay
The first-fruits of thy blessing

By thee the hungry soul is fed
With gifts of grace supernal
Thou who dost give us daily bread
Give us the bread eternal

O blessed is that land of God
Where saints abide forever
Where golden fields spread far and broad
Where flows the crystal river
The strains of all its holy throng
With ours today are blending
O blessed is that harvest-song
Which never hath an ending

READING

Matthew 25:14-30

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a trip. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. To one he gave five valuable coins, and to another he gave two, and to another he gave one. He gave to each servant according to that servant's ability. Then he left on his journey.

After the man left, the servant who had five valuable coins took them and went to work doing business with them. He gained five more. In the same way, the one who had two valuable coins

gained two more. But the servant who had received the one valuable coin dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

Now after a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five valuable coins came forward with five additional coins. He said, 'Master, you gave me five valuable coins. Look, I've gained five more.'

His master replied, 'Excellent! You are a good and faithful servant! You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.'

The second servant also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two valuable coins. Look, I've gained two more.'

His master replied, 'Well done! You are a good and faithful servant. You've been faithful over a little. I'll put you in charge of much. Come, celebrate with me.'

Now the one who had received one valuable coin came and said, 'Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed. So I was afraid. And I hid my valuable coin in the ground. Here, you have what's yours.'

His master replied, 'You evil and lazy servant! You knew that I harvest grain where I haven't sown and that I gather crops where I haven't spread seed? In that case, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, you could give me what belonged to me with interest. Therefore, take from him the valuable coin and give it to the one who has ten coins. Those who have much will receive more, and they will have more than they need. But as for those who don't have much, even the little bit they have will be taken away from them. Now take the worthless servant and throw him out into the farthest darkness.' People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

SONG: BRIAN

Abundantly More

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Verse 1

There is healing in the power of the Lord most high

There is courage in the shadow of God's wings

There is peace unending over all my life

There is freedom that washes over me

Chorus 1

I find all I need here in Your presence Lord

I open up my soul and You fill me up with

All I need here in Your presence Lord

Where blessings overflow

There's always abundantly more

Verse 2

There is rest in the goodness of the Lord my God
There is treasure in the kindness of my King
There is comfort in knowing Your unfailing love
My provider You set my spirit free

Bridge

More than I could ask or seek
More than I could fathom
God Your love for me
Is better than I imagined

SERMON

We Give Thanks for Risky Investments

This is a story about the kingdom of God.
I repeat, this is a story about the kingdom of God.

Last week we heard a story about the kingdom of God.
Next week we will hear a story about the kingdom of God.

Today, we heard a story about the kingdom of God, or as Jesus calls it in Matthew's gospel, the kingdom of heaven.

In this month of November, we are giving thanks. And the circumstances of the world around us these many months have made it difficult to be thankful, to find reasons to give thanks. So we are reading these challenging stories in Matthew 25 and giving thanks - for this day and the opportunities it brings, for the risky investment God makes in us, and for the daily opportunity to meet Jesus in our world. This is week two, and so today we focus on the second point: We give thanks for the opportunity to risk everything to make good on God's investment in us.

We heard a story today about a master and his servants, valuable coins, praise and punishment. But remember: this is a story about the kingdom of God. The master, the servants, the coins (called talents), and the story surrounding them is a metaphor. The story is fiction, designed to deliver a message and make a bigger point. And since we are far removed from the telling of the story, the cultural context and setting in which it was told, we need to work hard to hone in on the most important details. Like any metaphor or allegory, it can fall apart quickly if we take it too literally or too far.

Today we read this parable of the talents from Matthew's gospel. Another version of the story is also told by Luke, in chapter 19 of Luke's gospel. Why does that matter? It might be interesting to you to read the two versions and notice what is different and what is the same in the tellings

of the story. Are there some details included by one gospel writer that the other leaves out? Is it possible that there are some additions made by the gospel writers to help the story make the point they want to get across in their telling of the good news of Jesus? And how does the setting of the tale, what comes before and after it in each gospel, shift what point the writer wants to emphasize with this story?

I'll leave that comparative reading to you - if you are inclined to dig deeper this week. For this morning, I want to focus on Matthew's telling of the story. How do we know that this is a story about the kingdom of God? Matthew places it right here in a series of stories about the kingdom of God. And, in this telling Jesus begins by saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like..."

As we give thanks for the mission we have been given, there are some key details in this story that can help us understand what that mission is and what it means to be stewards of God's kingdom in this time and this place.

Let's start with those valuable coins. In my own mind, whenever I hear this story I think of just that - coins. Sure, valuable coins, maybe the equivalent of a few hundred dollars? Enough to be worth something, but not a life's fortune. I picture the drawings from the old children's Bibles where the servants hold out their hands and gold coins are piled in them. Anyone else?

Does the story change shape for you if I tell you that one *talenton*, one of these valuable coins, was the equivalent of FIFTEEN YEARS of wages for a day laborer? I did some math. We're not talking about a few hundred dollars here. We're talking about something like \$300,000 or so in today's economy FOR ONE COIN. That means the recipient of the five coins, in today's terms, was suddenly a millionaire with this gift from the master.

What has been given to these servants is incredibly generous and abundant - more than any of them could ever have dreamed of earning and saving up for on their own. Even the one talent was not a meager sum given as some sort of punishment - it was a large and generous sum. The story says that each servant was given a gift "according to that servant's ability." Put a pin in that - we are going to come back to that later.

One more key detail that I think is important about this gift of coins. In English, Pastor Laura read us this sentence: *He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them.* Scholar L. Susan Bond notes that the Greek word translated here as *possessions* "includes not only material goods but one's entire substance and life. The man makes a gift of epic proportions..." (Preaching God's Transforming Justice, Year A). Even in the metaphor, the money is not just about money. The master, upon his lengthy departure from the estate, makes a sacrificial gift to the servants, entrusting them with not only his material resources, but also his mission, his life-giving work.

Now let's talk about what happens when the master returns, unexpectedly, after being away for a very long time. He checks in on the investments he has made with his servants. The first two,

who had been given the largest amounts of resources, had gotten to work and seen great returns, doubling their wealth. The master is pleased and calls them *good* and *faithful*.

The focus of the story, however, is on the third servant. Having been given a smaller amount of resources to manage, admits that he buried the coin and then dug it up for the master upon his return.

Why did this servant bury the coin? In his commentary, Mark Douglas speaks about the third servant this way: "He does not squander his talent or use it for his own benefit, and he does return it to his master. His actions, though, are driven by fear - which turns the parable in a surprisingly subversive and paradoxical direction. The emotion that drives the third [servant] creates the conditions that lead to his downfall: fearing his master, that which he fears is realized" (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4).

The master is described by the third servant in harsh terms. When asked why he buried what was given to him, he said that he did it because he feared the master, whom he described as a hard man who takes from others' fields.

This is when the master becomes angry. He repeats the accusation back, but as a question. "This is what you know about me? You know that I am hard and dishonest? If that's who I am, then why wouldn't you have done more to make sure you had gathered interest on my investment?" The master notes that the servant's story doesn't add up. The servant wants to blame, accuse, and discredit the master when it is the servant who has fallen short.

And so we, readers and receivers of this *story about the kingdom of God*, have a decision to make. In the beginning of the story we've met a master who is overwhelmingly, absurdly generous and trusting in his servants. Now, we're being told by servant 3 that the master is actually dishonest and cruel. Whom do you believe?

Douglas poses a very compelling idea when he writes, "Perhaps, for Matthew, the God we face is the God we imagine."

He says this because scholars note that the end of this story - the casting out of the servant into the darkness, the weeping and gnashing of teeth - appears to be added by the gospel writer. We see similar language added other places when Matthew wants to be sure readers connect these stories to the idea of the final judgment.

And as it turns out, in that moment, playing it safe didn't get the third servant very far, did it? But remember, this isn't actually a story about money. We need to figure out what those coins, those talents represent. Some have said they represent our material resources, which we should be investing generously in God's work. That sounds good. Some have said that the coins represent our gifts - our talents - and in fact the English word *talent* is said to have been derived from this very story! That we have each been given spiritual gifts, which we are to invest in the work of God. That sounds good!

But I want to suggest another way to think of the coins. This shouldn't come as a surprise - I told you right from the beginning. This is a story about the kingdom of God! These coins, they represent THE KINGDOM OF GOD, entrusted by Jesus to his followers, as he knew that he would not be physically on earth forever. Jesus is entrusting to them the very kingdom, the here and now part of something that God is bringing together for fulfillment at a time we do not know. And here we are - followers of Jesus, the descendants of this faith, the inheritors of this gift. We have been given the very kingdom of God right here and now! Will we invest it, put it to work in our world, take great risk to grow it exponentially as a blessing for our neighbors? Or will we bury it, fearful of losing what it means to us? Worried that if we take that risk, we might lose what we think belongs to us?

John Buchman notes that for most of us, and I'd add here - most of us in the American, protestant, white, middle class church - "religion, our personal faith, has not seemed like a high-risk venture. In fact, it has seemed to be something like the opposite. Faith has seemed to be a personal comfort zone. Faith, many of us think, is about personal security, here and in the hereafter. Faith, we think, is no more risky than believing ideas in our heads about God and Jesus, a list of beliefs to which we more or less subscribe intellectually. Faith, we think, because that is what we have been taught, is getting our personal theology right and then living a good life by avoiding bad things. Religion, we think, is a pretty timid, nonrisky venture" (FOTW).

The third servant wanted a comfortable, personal, non-risky venture. Then the master returned, unexpected, and caught off guard, the third servant dared cast the master as a thief. Well, surprise! Jesus comes to steal away our false sense of security, our precarious comfort, and our desire to keep God's kingdom small and all for ourselves.

As I close, let me return, as promised, to that pesky line about each servant being given according to their ability. Does that sit uncomfortably with you? Perhaps because in our culture, we see people all the time valued or devalued based on arbitrary categories of value like: ability or disability, education, wealth, status, race, gender, addiction, past interactions with the legal system, sexuality, age. We love to decide who is worthy of more or less based on all kinds of continuums we have constructed to afford more or less value to people.

Is that what Jesus is doing here? Suggesting that as the master gave to each one according to their ability, so those with more ability get more access to God's kingdom? Maybe, but probably not the way we think he is. Remember, Jesus never operated within the established norms, hierarchies, or power dynamics of his day. Interestingly enough, the Greek word that is translated in our reading as *ability* is the word *dynamis* or *power*. We might not like that any better (or maybe we do like it): the master gave to them according to their power.

But before we become excited about our power, our ability, our wealth, our status, or our self-importance putting us at the front of the line for nice big portions of the kingdom of God, remember who Jesus said has power in the kingdom of heaven. Our middle schoolers read the passage for us just a few weeks ago - from Matthew 5. The kingdom of God belongs to the poor

in spirit, the oppressed, the grieving, the humble, the merciful, the persecuted. Power means something different in Jesus' vocabulary than it generally does in ours. Jesus is inviting us to take on the risk of living right now, today, as those who grow God's justice.

So, how are we releasing our comfort and worldly power in order to make a risky investment in God's kingdom? Are we listening to the people Jesus has named? Are we pouring our voices, spirits, and bodies into the valuing of our neighbors? Are we making the sacrifices that will benefit others instead of burying and protecting what we want to keep only for ourselves? Are we growing the investment that has been made in us by Jesus? Are we ready to truly put it all on the line?

We are called to nothing less than giving everything we have to God's mission.

We cannot do it if we live in fear, if we are only looking out for ourselves, if we enable the persistent harm and holding down of our neighbors, if we are only willing to acknowledge that which impacts us personally, if we speak and shout in our echo chambers but hide when it's time for action, if we allow someone else to take the risks and hope that will be enough, if we turn our heads to the suffering of others, if we deny the ways we have been complicit in the causes of that suffering.

In the end, what we really need to ask ourselves is this: who do we believe we serve? Do we trust in the generosity and abundance of God enough to give it all away? Or do we secretly fear that God is a hard hearted thief?

"Perhaps the God we face is the God we imagine."

May we dare to imagine, and may we risk living in the image of, a God who has entrusted to us the very kingdom of God. May that kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.

HYMN

Come, Ye Thankful People, Come

PASTORAL PRAYER

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN

In The Lord I'll Be Ever Thankful
Taize

In the Lord I'll be ever thankful
In the Lord I will rejoice
Look to God, do not be afraid
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE

Festival for Organ by James Mansfield