

‘Shareholders in the Spirit’

Rev. Dr. Ann C. Kemper

November 18, 2017

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

Please pray with me:

Loving God, giver of every useful and beautiful gift, you have made us shareholders in the Spirit and investors in the Gospel of Christ. Free us from the anxieties that limit our understanding and unlock the hardness of our hearts. Unleash the conditions we place on our generosity ... and fill us with love that compels us to walk with the poor; provide for the hungry; and deepen our grasp of what Jesus teaches us. Amen.

As shareholders in the Spirit and investors in the Gospel of Christ I invite you to hear these words from Pope Francis who designated November 19 as World Day of the Poor.

Pope Francis invites “the whole Church, and men and women of good will everywhere, ... to react against a culture of discard and waste, and to embrace the culture of encounter. At the same time, everyone, independent of religious affiliation, is invited to openness and sharing with the poor through concrete signs of solidarity and fraternity. God created the heavens and the earth for all; yet sadly some have erected barriers, walls and fences, betraying the original gift meant for all humanity, with none excluded.”

How appropriate is it that today is the day we work with The Historic Parsells Church to extend hospitality to people for whom we ache to encounter?

I look forward to seeing many of you downstairs this afternoon to help welcome, serve, and sit down to eat a Thanksgiving feast with our friends and neighbors.

For those of you who pay attention to the Christian calendar ... you know we are in the season of accountability where scripture leads us to explore our responsibility to living and conveying the good news of Jesus.

As Christians, we believe the good news of Jesus is the salvation of the world ... and that salvation begins with us.

Jesus’ good news message offers the world an understanding of what God desires of us and how we thrive on God’s gift of grace.

God’s grace ... isn’t grace as in charm or loveliness ... grace as in: God favors us without us having to do a single thing.

Even though we do not earn grace ... it is Jesus who teaches us how to respond to grace in faithful and generous ways. How we respond to those teachings is what leads us on a path toward God.

God give us at least one talent by grace and it is up to us to respond to that grace by being shareholders of the spirit and investors in the Gospel of Christ.

There is a cautionary caveat however. If you have interpreted the proclamation that grace is a free pass or as a discount coupon to heaven, then the scripture readings toward the end of this Christian year will be alarming to your hearing.

You will hear a lot about an abyss, or outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But for those of you who hear grace as a source of freedom from fear and anxiety and selfish endeavors ... then you will hear a much more welcoming understanding of God's great love through Jesus.

Jesus' teachings are clear: Love the poor! Share God's grace! Be prepared and remain faithful.

The gateway to heaven isn't open just because we're faithful in attending worship on Sunday ... we must also live our daily lives fully committed to our faith.

In many ways I hate preaching this time of year. I can't sugar coat the message. I can't re-direct your understanding of grace to something more timid and palatable.

We're running out of time. The Advent of Christ's coming is fast approaching.

Jesus foreshadows his mandate to human kind with this parable of the talents to use the gift of grace God gives us to invest in the future of Christ's church. The Apostle Paul did his best to help others understand this mandate not as condemning, but as hopeful.

Paul encouraged the faithful to continue to live in the hope that no matter the dire circumstances ... no matter the foreshadowing of apocalyptic doom and gloom ... God's great gift of grace in the form of Jesus Christ was the path forward to a life of health and wholeness and to a salvation for human kind.

Today's reading is Jesus' last lesson in Matthew is about talents.

A talent in those days wasn't a gift or skill ... like we understand the word today. A talent was a measurement of money. A single talent would be 6000 denarius ... a single talent would be enough money to support a family for many years. (assuming you didn't get selfish or overindulgent)

A talent was more than a cup, a liter, a bushel or a peck. A single talent was a lot of money ... so five talents was a fortune!

Jesus tells of a landowner who is going away on a trip and distributes his wealth to three slaves: to one he gives five talents (a fortune!); to another he gives two talents ... and to a third one talent.

He returns after a time away (he comes again) to find that the one he entrusted with five talents multiplied his wealth – he was deemed a “good and faithful servant”.

To the one he entrusted two talents ... that slave also multiplied his wealth and was deemed a “good and faithful servant”.

But to the one who was only given one talent ... despite knowing his master's expectations ... the slave who buried the wealth so that the landowner was guaranteed exactly what he left. This slave was deemed unfaithful and wicked, and thrown into the abyss where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The common interpretation of this is that God expects us to take the teachings of Jesus ... the wealth of our understanding of God's grace ... and multiply it and invest it in acts of mercy, compassion and justice.

We are to share the good news message in word and deed.

The one who only takes Jesus' teachings at face value and does nothing to further the wealth of God's grace ... would reap the consequence of being closed minded, selfish, and hard hearted.

It is really hard, if not impossible, to fully explain the gravity of this parable in a 15 minute sermon. But it is possible this parable highlights everything that we have prayed

about ... sung about ... and learned about since Easter of last year.

1. God's love for us is so great a fortune of talents is petty cash in comparison.
2. God's grace is so generous our response to that gift is what compels our ministry and mission.
3. Jesus' teachings and healing power is a metaphor that signifies the power of God to bring peace where there is conflict; rest where there is turmoil; and a clear sense of righteousness where greed and selfishness rule.

These are the times I wish I could summarize the Good News Message in a three-minute elevator speech. But I can't.

The Good News Message cannot be reduced or diluted ... it can only be enhanced by a lifetime of maturing and faithful journeying.

And it can only continue ... and thrive ... when shared in authentic and heart-felt ways.

Jesus had a message to share with the nations about God and God's grace. He knew his way of understanding God would be in conflict with the powers and principalities of his day.

Despite the threat, Jesus was consistently authentic, heart-felt, and challenging. An example for us all.

Next week we will give thanks for all that God has first given us and embrace the good news that tells us:

... there is freedom to those who feel captive to systems of injustice and unkind ways; and it's up to us to reveal that freedom in our mission, ministry and message.

... there is hope embedded in the good news of grace for those who only sense hopelessness;

...and there is more than enough love to go around as long as we are each willing to risk more to being shareholders of the Spirit and investors in the good news message.

In my mind, that's a pretty good way to kick off World Day of the Poor.

Amen.