

WORSHIP FOR SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 15, 2020

First Presbyterian Church of Union, Missouri

**THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME**

**GATHERING**

**PRELUDE**

**CALL TO WORSHIP** *(from I Thessalonians 5)*

One: Clothe yourselves with faith and love;  
**All: to encourage one another and build new life.**  
One: The Lord is with us!  
**All: Let us worship God.**

**OPENING HYMN** “God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending” GtG 716

One: God, whose giving knows no ending,  
from your rich and endless store,  
**All: nature's wonder, Jesus' wisdom,  
costly cross, grave's shattered door:**  
One: gifted by you,  
**All: we turn to you,**  
One: offering up ourselves in praise;  
**All: thankful song shall rise forever,  
gracious donor of our days.**

One: Skills and time are ours for pressing  
toward the goals of Christ, your Son:  
**All: all at peace in health and freedom,  
races joined, the church made one.**

One: Now direct our daily labor,  
**All: lest we strive for self alone.**  
One: Born with talents,  
**All: make us servants  
fit to answer at your throne.**

One: Treasure, too, you have entrusted,  
**All: gain through powers your grace conferred:**  
One: ours to use for home and kindred,  
**All: and to spread the gospel word.**

One: Open wide our hands in sharing,  
as we heed Christ's ageless call,

**All: healing,**

One: teaching,

**All: and reclaiming,**

One: serving you

**All: by loving all.**

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### **UNISON PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

**Giver of good gifts, grant us now the capacity to hear both your commendation and your word of judgment. We have hidden the gifts you entrust to us. We have wasted the resources of the earth for our self-indulgence. We live in darkness rather than in the light, ignoring your purposes and your needy people. O God, save us from our blind pursuit of the wrong goals and our careless disregard of your guidance. Have mercy on us, for we are weak and prone to disobedience. Hear our confession, and respond to us with kindness, that we might turn to you again, walk in the light, and live in equity and peace; through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.**

### **SILENT CONFESSION**

#### **ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

One: Sisters and brothers,  
when we acknowledge our human limitations  
and turn to depend upon our everlasting God,  
we grow wise in heart to God's commands.

**All: By the grace of God we belong to our Lord Jesus Christ,  
and we need not fear—  
for he lived for us, he died for us,  
he was raised for us and prays for us.**

One: So believe the promise of his call and his claim:

**All: We are freed for love and grace and life,  
for our sins are forgiven by the mercy of Christ. Amen.**

### **THE PEACE**

One: The peace of Christ be with you.

**All: And also with you.**

*(From your seat, a brief sign of peace may be shared: a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, etc.)*

## THE WORD

### SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 25:14-30

MATTHEW 25:14-30 (various)

<sup>14</sup> “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who was leaving on a journey. He called his servants and handed his possessions over to them. <sup>15</sup> To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two, and to another one, each according to his ability. Then he left on his journey. <sup>16</sup> The one who had received the five bags of gold went off at once and went to work with them. He gained five more. <sup>17</sup> In the same way, the one who had received two gained two more. <sup>18</sup> But the one who had received the one went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup> After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup> Then the one who had received the five bags of gold came forward, bringing five more bags of gold, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five bags of gold. Look! I have gained five more bags of gold.’ <sup>21</sup> His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will appoint you over many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup> And the one with the two bags of gold also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two bags of gold. Look! I have gained two more bags of gold.’ <sup>23</sup> His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will appoint you over many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup> Then the one who had received the one bag of gold also came forward, and said, ‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. <sup>25</sup> So I was afraid, and I went and hid your bag of gold in the ground. Look! Here you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup> But his master replied, ‘You bad and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? <sup>27</sup> Well then, you should have turned my money over to the bankers so that when I returned, I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup> Therefore, take from him the bag of gold and give it to the one who has ten bags of gold. <sup>29</sup> For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. <sup>30</sup> And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

**SERMON** by Pastor Bill Vincent

To begin with, notice the extravagance of the master: giving so much to the servants; entrusting huge sums with the servants.

One bag of gold was worth between 15 and 20 years’ worth of a laborer’s wage: 15-20 years worth of income.

And talk about extravagance.

What about the extravagance of the return: 100%! for the servants with 5 bags of gold and 2 bags of gold. Any Wall Street investor would be ecstatic over such a return.

But, I think something else is going on here, more than simply a profitable investment strategy.

So yes, notice the extravagance of the return.

And the disappointment over none.

The servant with the 1 bag of gold.

Notice: he didn't do anything with his gift that had been entrusted to him. He did not do a thing. It just sat there -- buried, that is.

It's almost as if the servant, having been given this extravagant and extraordinary gift from the master...it's as if the servant says, "I don't want it."

And, in the end, it's as if the master says, "Well, ok."

Now, some people point out that the master's response seems overly harsh, 'taking' the 1 bag of gold from the servant and giving it to another.

But, upon further reflection, I wonder: could it be less the case that the master 'takes it away' from the one servant, and more a recognition (or even an illustration) of a truth that we see all around us all the time: "Use it, or lose it."

If I don't use -- if I don't recognize and utilize, develop and engage -- a gift or ability or skill that I have, then it withers and wastes away.

If I don't practice singing, then my lung capacity diminishes.

If I don't use my arms or my legs, then their strength and ability atrophies.

And so, maybe part of the point of the story/parable is simply (and powerfully) that of opportunity missed.

Someone once noted, "Opportunity, if not recognized and acted upon immediately will slip out of reach forever."

And who hasn't wept and gnashed some teeth recognizing too late the golden opportunity that we have allowed to slip through our fingers forever.

So, where's the grace?

We tend to do that: we look for grace, we long for grace, we expect grace of some sort when we engage Jesus and his teaching and his life.

So, where's the grace here?

Perhaps it's in the very gifts themselves.

Gifts that come from the very grace of the master.

Gifts that come with -- could it be? -- an assurance, even a promise.

You see, the servants with 5 bags of gold and 2 bags of gold experience extravagant, extraordinary 'returns': 100%.

But we have no idea what they did with them.

Regarding the servant with 2 bags of gold, only that he *'gained'* another 2.

Regarding the servant with 5 bags of gold, the story simply says *'he worked with'* what he had received. That's all: 'he worked with'. Doesn't say he was particularly wise or astute, or even lucky. But simply that 'he worked with' what he had been given.

And, lo and behold, a 100% return.

Where have we heard something like that before?

*"And some seed bore fruit 30, 60, 100-fold."* The parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9).

Could it be that our guiding principle in understanding our parable is less that of financial markets and more that of the farmers market.

In that earlier parable, the sower sows the seed, and yes, some seed doesn't produce anything. But some seed does: some seed produces thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

Could it be that, in keeping with the parable of the sower, part of what our story is telling us is the offer of a promise that, if we only do something with what we've been given, there will be a return?

Now, more than one person pointed out that one thing our parable does not do is illustrate what happens with the person who worked with their gift...and nothing came of it, or they lost everything. In that situation, we just don't know.

The only option that is described as not acceptable is doing nothing with the gift: not working with it at all; ignoring it; saying, in essence, "No thank you, not interested."

But what if we said "Yes." What if we received the gift -- seeing it for the grace that it is -- what if we received the gift and did something -- did anything -- with it: 'worked with it' in some way, shape, or fashion.

It seems Jesus might be suggesting that, if we have eyes to see, there will be a return, even an extravagant return -- if only we work with the gift we have received. That is an assurance, a promise. That is the nature of the gift given, and the nature of the master who gives, and gives extravagantly.

And so what does all this mean for us? What does it say to us? What does it suggest for us and our lives?

Maybe our life is part of it.

Did you ever stop to think how extravagant a gift your very life is? What are you doing with it? Not saying 'productivity' is the essence of a good life. But posing the question: How have you engaged your life, and life itself? How have you embraced your life, and life itself?

Or is life -- your life -- something that you fear, like the third servant's fear of his master. You fear you'll screw up, you fear failure, and so you do nothing, because you believe 'I am nothing, I have nothing to give.' (In contradiction, I would point out, to the master's entrusting you with this gift.) But if you live in fear, believing 'I am nothing, I have nothing to give', then your decision to do nothing but bury your life ends up a self-fulfilled prophecy.

What have you received in your life: what aptitude, ability, interest, or ‘thing’ that is part of God’s extravagant grace to you...and how are you ‘working with it’? How are you using this ability, how are you developing that interest, how are you sharing your skill? Not as an obligation -- the weighty burden of responsibility that I really don’t want -- but the invitation to receive this extraordinary gift, and engage it with joy. For maybe this is part of what it means to “enter into the joy of your master.”

And what about the gift of the very news we hear and come together to explore and learn about week after week? What about the gift of this good news of Jesus Christ and God’s love and grace and embrace? How have we worked with this gift? What have we done with it? Have we lived into it and truly engaged it and embraced it for ourselves? Have we shared it and shared it’s joy with others? Have we opened our eyes to the return we have experienced in our lives because of this gift -- the comfort and assurance, the hope and community, the encouragement and faith, the love and life -- and have we shared that overflowing return of grace with others?

“Look! Master, you gave me this wondrous gift. And I accepted it and received it and engaged it and ‘worked with it’. And lo and behold, there’s more to go around!”

Thanks be to God  
for a life received and engaged  
for the glory, and the joy, of God.

Amen.

#### **\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH**

**In life and in death we belong to God.**

**Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,  
we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel,  
whom alone we worship and serve.**

**We trust in God the Holy Spirit,  
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.**

**The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,  
sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,  
and binds us together with all believers  
in the one body of Christ, the Church.**

**The same Spirit  
who inspired the prophets and apostles  
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,  
engages us through the Word proclaimed,  
claims us in the waters of baptism,  
feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,  
and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.**

**In a broken and fearful world  
the Spirit gives us courage  
to pray without ceasing,  
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,  
to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,  
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,  
and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.  
In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,  
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks  
and to live holy and joyful lives,  
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,  
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"**

(from *A Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Confessions)

## **RECEPTION of NEW MEMBER**

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**

Pastor: God of grace...

People: ...hear our prayer.

### **THE LORD'S PRAYER** (*Contemporary*)

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours  
now and forever. Amen.**

### **OFFERING**

*Invitation*

*Reflection*

*Unison Prayer of Dedication*

**For all that you are and all that you do, we give you thanks, good Lord our God. We wait in hope for the coming of your realm and offer our gifts to further your kingdom on earth: to share your love with others, that all may enter into your eternal joy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

## SENDING

### CLOSING HYMN "Come, Labor On" GtG 719

One: Come, labor on.

**All: Who dares stand idle on the harvest plain  
while all around us waves the golden grain?**

One: And to each servant does the Master say,

**All: "Go work today."**

One: Come, labor on.

**All: Claim the high calling angels cannot share;  
to young and old the gospel gladness bear.**

One: Redeem the time; its hours too swiftly fly.

**All: The night draws nigh.**

One: Come, labor on.

**All: Cast off all gloomy doubt and faithless fear!  
No arm so weak but may do service here.**

One: Though feeble agents,

**All: may we all fulfill  
God's righteous will.**

One: Come, labor on.

**All: No time for rest, till glows the western sky,  
till the long shadows o'er our pathway lie,**

One: and a glad sound comes with the setting sun,

**All: "Well done, well done!"**

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### CHARGE AND BLESSING

Pastor: ...And let the gathered people of God say...

**People: ...Amen.**

### POSTLUDE

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