

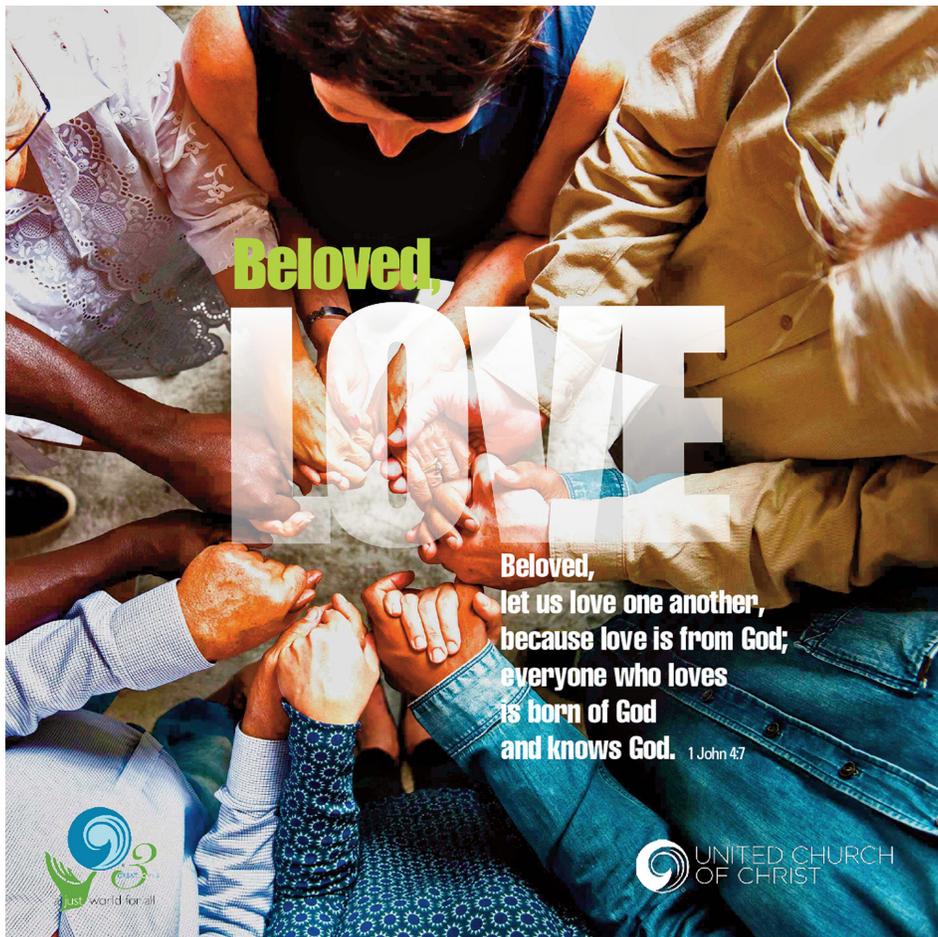
Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

November 15, 2020

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
In-Gathering / Consecration Sunday



We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation or socio-economic background.

To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities and blessing of our congregation.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

Order of Worship

PRELUDE

The Gift of Love

Hal Hopson

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Doug Miller, *Announcer*

LIGHTING THE CANDLES AND TOLLING THE BELL

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**) selected from Zephaniah 1 & 2

Be silent before the Sovereign God whose day is at hand.

Our God has prepared a sacrifice and has consecrated the guests.

Our God's great day is near, near and hastening fast;

in the fire of God's passion the whole earth shall be consumed.

Gather together, yes, gather.

Seek your God. Seek righteousness and humility, for then God will be mindful of you and restore your fortunes.

HYMN OF THE DAY *God Whose Giving Knows No Ending* Tune: AUSTRIAN HYMN

God, whose giving knows no ending,

From your rich and endless store:

Nature's wonder, Jesus' wisdom,

Costly cross, grave's shattered door,

Gifted by you, we turn to you,

Off'ring up ourselves in praise;

Thankful song shall rise forever,

Gracious donor of our days.

Skills and time are ours for pressing

That your will on earth be done:

All at peace in health and freedom,

Races joined, the Church made one.

Now direct our daily labor,

Lest we strive for self alone;

Born with talents, make us servants

Fit to answer at your throne.

Treasure, too, you have entrusted,
Gain through pow'rs your grace conferred;
Ours to use for home and kindred,
And to spread the gospel word.
Open wide our hands in sharing,
As we heed Christ's ageless call,
Healing, teaching, and reclaiming,
Serving you by loving all.

PRAYER OF APPROACH (Responsive) Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*
from Psalm 123

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens.

**As the eyes of servants look to the hand of the ones who
command them, so our eyes look to you, O God, until you
have mercy on us.**

Have mercy on us, O God, have mercy on us;

we have had more than enough of contempt. Amen.

MESSAGE OF THE DAY Reading and commentary of Matthew 25:14-30
Led by Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*
with Student Pastors Merrimon Boyd and Elston McCowan

DAVE

Last week, we read and retold a story that Jesus told about the importance of being always aware of how God is with you and when God is coming to you. Today, Pastor Merrimon, Pastor Elston, and I are going to retell another story that Jesus told about being ready for God to be with us. You'll want to listen closely.

Pause.

As Jesus began the story, he said to his listeners that God will show up when you least expect it. He said,

MERRIMON

“The commonwealth of heaven is as if someone, going on a journey, summoned their slaves and entrusted their property to them; to one they gave five talents, to another two, to another one — to each according to their ability. Then the boss went away.”

DAVE

That word, *talent*, in Jesus' time referred to the amount of money you could earn in about a year. So the first one got five years' worth of money, the second two years', and the third one. So, what did they do with it? Pastor Elston will tell you...

ELSTON

“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 the boss's money.

MERRIMON

“After a long time the boss came home and settled accounts with them.

ELSTON

“Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Boss, you handed over to me five talents? Look at this, I have made five more talents.’

MERRIMON

“The boss said to the slave, ‘Well done, you good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; come, and know my joy!’

ELSTON

“Next, the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Say boss, you know how you handed over to me two talents? Well, look at this, I have made two more talents.’

MERRIMON

“The boss said to second slave, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave! You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; come, and know my joy.’

ELSTON (proudly, not sheepishly)

“Then the one who had received the one talent also came

forward, saying, ‘Sir, 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. Now you have back what was yours to begin with.’ ”

DAVE

So, one gave the proprietor back twice as much as they’d been given: ten years worth of money! And that one was rewarded.

The second one also returned twice as much: four years worth of money. And that one was rewarded.

The third gave back exactly what had been given them in the first place, a year’s worth of money.

Now, you might detect a pattern here. What do you suppose should happen next? Remember, Jesus said that the reason he was telling this story was so that we could be alert to times when God is with us. What should happen next, with the slave who returned just exactly what they had been given?

Allow responses.

Why do you think so?

Allow responses.

OK. So, here’s how Jesus told the story...

MERRIMON

“But the master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! 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.

“ ‘So take the talent from this one, and give it to the one with the ten talents.’ ”

DAVE

“Jesus continued, ‘For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this third one, let them be punished!’ ”

Did that ending match what you think should happen? Is it fair, what

the boss did in this story? (Why is it fair? What makes it unfair?) Have you ever gotten into trouble for doing less than someone else? Have you ever gotten into trouble for something that you thought was absolutely right?

MERRIMON

I'll tell you something: there are lots of people who experience stuff like this all the time. We'll do what we think is asked of us, the way the third slave did, and our boss or our teacher or somebody else, whoever's in charge and is judging our work will say that we didn't do what they had in mind.

ELSTON

I don't think that the third slave in this story was treated very fairly, do you? I mean, they did their best, right? At least the best they knew how, based on how they'd experienced the boss before...

DAVE

Now, I think that there are some very good things about this story. I think that the idea of living up to your best possibilities – the way that the first and second slaves did – is certainly something that we should follow, don't you? That's the meaning of the Parable of the Talents the way I learned it: always work to the fullness of your talents and abilities.

And I bet that all of you do! I bet that every one of you has teachers and parents who know how to make you feel really good when you accomplish something, even if you might not have done it perfectly.

But what I have learned since I was about a teenager is that, sometimes, people are disappointed in us just because, for some reason, *they don't think we're good enough.*

MERRIMON

It can happen for all kinds of different reasons. It might be the color of your skin, or what you're wearing, or it might be the way you say something or the words you use. They might not like the way you look at them. You know, you can't control how people think or feel. All we can do is, be ourselves and use our best judgment.

ELSTON

Jesus recognizes this, and I think he is saying what we are saying, that the third slave didn't get treated very well by the boss. You can almost see him shrugging his shoulders at the end of the story when he says, "For to all

those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

DAVE

Furthermore, when we read the story that comes after this one, I am clear that Jesus thinks so, too. That’s a story we call “The Sheep and the Goats,” and I’ll be talking about it, next Sunday.

For now, I just think it’s important for all of you to know that Jesus came up with this third slave, who was treated very poorly, to show how people live like this every day. But he knew more about this sort of situation, too.

MERRIMON

The boss knew from the start that this person was not as good at investing money as the other two, and so the gave this slave less than the others. But when the slave at least proved that when entrusted with the money there would be none lost, the slave was punished.

It’s sad. But that’s the way people get treated sometimes, Jesus seems to say. So the next story he tells, the story of the Sheep and the Goats, will show the way that God really wants things to be. And we’ll tell you *that story*, next week. OK?

Pause.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

Thanks be to God.

Leon begins to play an interlude.

DAVE

Wait! Wait, Leon. Hold on. I’ve got a little more on my heart about this.

To the Congregation.

I want to draw your attention to something that I’ve been thinking about this parable for the last many years. And when I tell you all this, it’s not to throw out two millennia of interpretation. I’m not saying that the traditional meaning is wrong. I’m saying that I’m not satisfied with it, anymore.

Focus on that money for just a little while longer. Let’s think about this...

How much of that money could any of these imaginary slaves have possibly expected to pocket for themselves? Evidently none. All three of

them turn back over the entire amount they have accumulated or guarded when it is demanded of them. They will receive no material gain, no compensation, not so much as a small share of the money entrusted to them... because that's the nature of their relationship with the slaveholder.

Indeed, the third one observes that the boss is one who "reap where you do not sow and gather where you do not scatter." The boss has others to do that kind of work... and apparently quite profitably.

Economically speaking, what Jesus of Nazareth has herewith identified is the classic conflict between capital and labor. But in this case he draws our attention to the distinct inequality existing between slave and slaveholder!

Because here's the real twist of this story, and we often miss it! *As a reward*, the two who actually help their boss to realize a profit... Do they get to go on vacation? Do they receive a finder's fee? No.

What is their reward?

More work!

So, here's how the world is for these guys... you make money, and you not only don't get any of it, but, according to the outcomes for the other two, you'll be handed *still more responsibility*, and you'll get to do it at a slave's wage (\$0).

Keep the money safe and without risk, the way the third slave did, and although it's likely you'll get punished, at least you won't have disobeyed (so, you'll still technically have your integrity). Plus, you won't be expected in the future to do *more work* for the same non-pay. And you'll have stuck it to your boss for having expected from you something for which you wouldn't be rewarded.

Every third year when we concentrate on the gospel of Matthew, when we get to this next-to-last Sunday in the liturgical calendar, we're handed this reading. I don't doubt that the people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary, our three-year cycle of readings, realized that we'd all be doing our invitations to generosity and in-gatherings for the coming year. This reading seems to go along with those. The traditional interpretation of it is, *Profit as you are able for the sake of God's work*. Right? I think that's the message you're supposed to be hearing.

But that's not necessarily the message that's here. The message we're getting here – with a little more investment of time to interpret it – is

something more along the lines of, “Stick it to the man!” It’s another call for justice, drawing our attention to the unfairness of the world. “To those with much, still more will be given. To those with little, even what they have will be taken away.” We need to stop that pattern, to prevent it.

So, the commonwealth of heaven isn’t like an arrogant, unjust slaveholder and his household. It might be like a couple of slaves who do their best so that someone else profits from their labors.

But the commonwealth of heaven is certainly like a slave who is clever enough to do no harm to their boss or to the economy. They manage instead, to avoid being over-burdened by a system that offers no genuine reward to the downtrodden and the lowly but only makes matters worse for them.

When read that way, it’s an ironic choice of parable for Stewardship Sunday.

Still, the message Jesus was driving at, the way I’m reading it with you now, points to the importance of *having a Stewardship Sunday, an In-Gathering of pledges to the benefit of the church, a consecration of our gifts and ourselves to God’s purposes*. Do you see?

The God with us is one who rules the world in justice and truth and a blessed amount of grace – a God of the Three Great Loves (neighbor, children, creation) and who commands us to “Love one another.” We do well when we seek our God’s purposes and renew our commitment to God’s will as often as we may.

For that is the God whom Jesus personified. That is the God whom the body of Christ seeks to manifest – the Church. Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Share Our Joys and Concerns

Elston McCowan, *Student Minister*

our residents in assisted living — Joyce, Paul, Sharon, Bob and Carol
people we love who are living with cancer — especially Bob, Jaymie,
and Peter

Becky and David, and all those the world regards as disabled

Dave as he recovers from surgery

Margaret – living with cancer (and doing so well!)

Laurel’s mother

Bruce, job-hunting
all those who are living with dementia; and their caregivers
this faith community, as we seek new staff to lead our ministries for
children and youth
COVID-19 patients
People with mental illness, family, friends, caregivers, and roommates
First responders, frontline workers, teachers and their loved ones
peace with justice
our president-elect and vice president-elect, and the outgoing
Administration
wisdom and healing for our divided nation

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

Prayer of Our Savior (Unison)

Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

WE SHARE OUR BLESSINGS WITH OTHERS

Invitation

Doug Miller

Stewardship Moment

John Paci, *Stewardship Committee*

Anthem

I Will Sing of Your Love, Love, Love

C. Grundy

I will sing of your love, love, love,

Of your steadfast love for as long as I live.

And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing of a love so wide

That it welcomes the neighbor and will not divide.

And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing, "Let the children come

Do not hinder them," for you love everyone.

And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.

I will sing of the trees so tall,

Of the oceans so deep, and your love for them all.

And I will sing of your love, love, love, for as long as I live.
Your love is stronger than the mountains,
Soaks through me like a pouring rain,
It's no wonder that I'm answering your call.
Whenever someone needs a neighbor
And wherever there's a child in pain,
We'll be working on a just world for all.

Raising the Covenant (Unison)

Covenant of 1977

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

POSTLUDE

March

Charles Gounod

BENEDICTION

Rev. Denoon

DISMISSAL

Doug Miller



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