

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The 24th Sunday after Pentecost
15 November 2020*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: O Lord, open thou our lips,

P: and our mouth shall show forth your praise.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of holy love, we worship and adore your goodness. Lord Jesus Christ, we adore the truth of your life lived among us. Holy Spirit of God, we praise your power to secure our hearts to the goodness of the Father and the truth of the Son. Glory be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, world without end.

Merciful One, help us to confess our sin. Because of the chaos and cruelty that bedevil our world and dwell in our hearts, because of the weakness of our ways and the temper of our times, we had nearly forgotten that you have made us in your image, redeemed us by your love, and fashioned us for a purpose. Pardon and deliver us from sin. Help us to put our trust in you. We need your life and strength in ours.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Gracious Lord, whose sovereign purpose none can make void, give us faith to be steadfast amid the tumult of this world, trusting that your kingdom shall come and your will be done, to your eternal glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Holy One, in the speaking of your Word, tell us what we need to hear and show us what we ought to do; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 123 (*A Plea for Mercy*)

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 their master,
 as the eyes of a maid
 to the hand of her mistress,
 so our eyes look to the Lord our God,
 until he has mercy upon us.
 Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
 for we have had more than enough of contempt.
 Our soul has had more than its fill
 of the scorn of those who are at ease,
 of the contempt of the proud.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St Matthew 25: 14-30 (*Jesus's Parable of the Talents*)

It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

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 his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents."

His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, “Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.”

His master said to him, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, “Master, 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 you have what is yours.”

But his 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 him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

“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 worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Matthew 25:25 *“I was afraid, so I went and hid your talent in the ground.”*

This is a harsh parable. A master gives something to each of his servants. Jesus calls them ‘talents’. A ‘talent’ was a measure of *weight*, but it’s also a unit of currency – rather like the British ‘pound’. But it’s a happy accident that in English ‘talent’ also means ‘gift’ or ‘skill’. And it’s not wrong to think of the talents we’re born with as endowments we’re given to spend, aptitudes we’re meant to use.

You know the saying: “Use it or lose it.” Unworked muscles atrophy, and unpractised talents stagnate. If we never use what lies within us in some sort of *outward* doing – a work, a discipline, an enterprise – our lives lose their charge, like batteries stowed at the back of a drawer. One day we go to use them, only to find they’re ‘dead’.

The master gives one servant five talents, another two, and another just one. Then he leaves. Two of them take what’s given and make something more of it. They earn the master’s praise and a seat at his table. “Enter into the joy of your master”, he says. We’ve felt this joy too, whenever we’ve spent ourselves on something worthwhile.

It's not a vicarious joy – joy in someone else's achievement – though that's real too. It's the special joy we feel for what we ourselves have done.

But the third servant buries his single talent. And though he returns it, intact, when the master returns, the master banishes him to outer darkness, far from the heat and light of his favour, where there is no joy, just weeping and gnashing of teeth. For this fearful servant has done the exact opposite of that enterprising person depicted in *another* of Jesus' parables, the one about a man who learned of some treasure buried in a field, and he spent everything he had to buy that field. Then he dug up the treasure and enjoyed it. "The kingdom of heaven is like *that*," said Jesus.

I think he means this: God has buried treasure in each of our lives. We only need to dig it up, bring it to light, and put it to use. That's the point of having treasure. "The kingdom of heaven is like *that*," says Jesus. Therefore, it's not like this: it's not burying the talent God gave us. It's not 'saving' it by never using it up (like the battery buried at the back of the drawer).

Why *did* he bury his talent? Why, in so many lives, is the paint box closed, the piano un-played, the hobby abandoned? What stops us from singing our song, making our craft, and telling our story? And what about our words of love unspoken, our truth unuttered, our dream untested – in other words, our *unlived life*? Why would we never unearth our buried talent, our potential selves? It's fear, isn't it?

"You're a harsh master. I was afraid," said the servant. "So, I buried the talent you gave me in the ground."

Some of us were trained to think all sin comes from pride, and only pride, from 'showing off'. But no. To be accused of 'showing off' may say more about the accuser than you. Sin can come from fear too – not just any old fear, but timidity, fear of exposure to judgment, the paralyzing fear of failure, and the shame that goes with it. Who wants their failures to be seen?

But *failure* is not a sin, not if the effort is earnest and real. Failure is one more notch on the belt of experience, bringing us (perhaps) one step closer to success. Anyone who's never said, "*Back to the drawing board*", has lived too timidly, too safely. "Experience is the name I give to my failures," said Oscar Wilde. "And I am very experienced!" (He was never shy about showing off *his* talent).

"I was afraid," says the servant to his master. "I know how harsh you can be. So, I did the safest thing I could think of: I buried what you gave me and I made nothing of it. But neither did I lose it: here's the talent you loaned me: you can have it back now." But 'now' is too late. Now he suffers the very wrath he thought he could avoid by 'playing it safe'. He was wrong.

"If I can't win, I won't run," says the sprinter, Harold Abraham, in the film *Chariots of Fire*. "If you don't run, you can't win," says his fed-up fiancé. For he's just lost a race to his rival, Eric Liddell, and he's stung by this and sulking. He hasn't learned the value of losing, and learning from loss. But the film wants us to see that the

point of sprinting as fast as you can – indeed, the point of living – lies in the cultivation of an in-born talent. “God made me fast,” says Eric Liddell in that same film – “and when I run, I can feel God’s pleasure.” Somehow, he knew that talent is linked to the pleasure of living, which is God’s pleasure in us. Dare we believe in *that*? And if we do, dare we act on that belief? For real pleasure comes not from the mere *having* of a talent or gift, but from its *use*. But then be warned: its use courts failure. How can it not?

We choose safety. We mouth the opinions others espouse; we conform; we blend in lest we attract ridicule. We dismiss our dreams or laugh them off, before others wound us, and accuse us of showing off. Thus, we deprecate what’s most precious about us. Why would we do that?

We do it because a little tape plays in our heads, whispering words of fear. It says this: “If you risk this enterprise you’ll fail; if you fail people will reject you and ridicule you; if they reject and ridicule you, you’ll be wounded and unloved; if you’re wounded and unloved it’s because you’re worthless and unlovable to begin with. But that discovery is too painful,” says the voice. “So, you’d better risk nothing at all. Be afraid. Be safe.” Do you recognise this voice? Jesus did. He rebuked it. He called it a lie, especially that last part. We’re not worthless. We’re not unlovable. And we’re not failures – not if we’re trying to *use* our lives for his sake.

Even so, let’s not pretend there’s no pain involved. People may spurn your gift, and that is painful. You may act on your talent, answer your call, work toward your wish, follow your dream. But then you may find you’re no longer welcome in the community you inhabit, or the family who reared you, who claim to love you. You may be driven into outer darkness, far from the heat and light of their favour, where there’s weeping and gnashing of teeth. And that is a deep, deep sorrow.

And yet, *all this Jesus knew*. All of this *he* experienced too. He heard the whispers of fear. Then he faced them, and expended himself fully, to express his talent and calling, which was to reveal God’s love in the actions of his life and on the cross. He tasted failure, defeat, hatred, and death, not so *we* could avoid those things, but to show us how to live in the face of them, and (with the help of his strength and favour) to make the same journey he did: to lose our life in the spending of it, and so save it.

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God, holy and timeless, you create the moments of our lives, giving each its meaning and purpose. Keep our hearts steadfast in times of trouble, and confirm us in the strength of your word. With grateful hearts we commit our lives once more into your keeping.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church, for its mission and witness and work in the world. Holy Lord, make your Church more and more to be an instrument of your peace and a witness to your justice.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Because it would cheer Christ's heart, we pray for those in any kind of need, and those hurt by illness, or tragedy, or accident; for those traumatised by terrorism, or wounded by calamity. May your strong love sustain them in their suffering, and may your people care for them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the health of our nation, the cities of our land, and for those who make laws. We pray for good government throughout the world, for justice and lasting peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Almighty God, your Son had nowhere to lay his head. Have compassion on those who have no home, who sleep in the streets and in crowded shelters. Let them not be hopeless and homeless, and help us to work and pray for the day when all your children are housed and fed and free to live full lives.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering the communion of saints, we keep a time of silence to pray for ourselves, for those near us, and for whatever troubles our hearts today....*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Serene Son of God, who subdued troubled waters and calmed the fears of people, let your majesty master us, and your loving will control us; that for our fear we may have faith, and for our sorrow a perfect trust in you, who live and govern all things, world without end.

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

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. Amen**