

**Sunday, November 16, 2014**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “You are our Potter”**

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Matthew’s twenty fifth gospel captures the mood at the end of Jesus’ life.

Jesus knows that his time on earth is limited and he is trying to convey his message to his disciples every way he can think of.

He has used question and answer format, exhortation or lecture and, of course, parable.

I am reminded of the few weeks leading up to a child going off to college.

Each moment is thought of as an opportunity to impart some important piece of wisdom to be saved up and drawn upon when life gets hard.

The disciples don’t really understand that their time with their teacher is limited and I’m sure they were a bit confused by some of the information.

Today’s parable, at first read, might sound like a lesson on sound investing or careful stewardship of assets.

Jesus, however, is not prone to giving financial advice. New Testament scholar Charles Cousar says, Jesus uses these stories to "direct the hearers' attention to the issues at hand, to faithfulness, preparedness, and risk."

This parable of a servant who buried the money he had been given, instead of circulating it in the world and multiplying its value and its effect is a lesson for us to recognize the gifts that God has given us and to use them to create a better world.

This passage works well with our Old Testament reading. “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hands.”

I actually like the idea of being a lump of unformed clay gently brought to shape and life by God.

The concept of God forming me – choosing what gifts might be mine, and what talents might be left out is comforting.

Carrying the clay metaphor just a bit further, I like the way that clay can be reformed, reshaped, if the circumstances call for it.

Of course, the potters among you might argue that once that clay is cured, there is no altering of the shape.

However, I think Isaiah is talking about clay in its early malleable stages.

Regardless, the important point is that God gives us gifts and God expects us to use them wisely.

Which of the three slaves in the story resonates with you?

The first one is given five talents and generates five talents – good return;

The second doubled his talents as well, while the third fellow, afraid of losing what little he had simply hid it away and didn't risk anything.

The uncomfortable end to the story is that the poor man who was afraid ends up being admonished by the master and thrown “into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is not the first time we have heard of this dark place.

Jesus uses this description five times in Matthew's gospel as a description of the destiny of those who have little faith.

In chapter 8 after healing a centurion's servant and lauding his faith he says that the “heirs to the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

In chapter 13 “weeping and gnashing of teeth” is the ending for the parables of the hidden treasure, the fine pearl and the abundant catch.

Just a few weeks ago we heard chapter 22's ending of the wedding banquet invitation with the poorly dressed guest being “thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Chapter 24 also ends with a recalcitrant slave sharing this fate.

As we read these parables it is important to remember that chapter and verse numbers were not part of the original manuscript, but were added much later.

The writer placed all of these stories together to make a point.

They are all intended to tell us something about the ever-coming Reign of God and our need to be ready to participate in its coming.

I am quite certain that I do not want to be “thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth” so I am going to pay very close attention to what Jesus says I need to do to avoid this.

From one commentator we hear, “All of these stories are about the unexpected coming of God's Reign, and our capacity to participate in what God is doing whether we see God's presence or not.

If we use our talents well, but only for our own benefit, we have failed to be ready and to participate in the coming of God's Reign.

But, if we use our talents for the sake of God's Reign - for the blessing and upliftment of others - we have shown ourselves to be part of God's mission.”

What I glean from these parables is:

that faith is important – really, deep, true, in your bones kind of faith;

that God wants us to use the gifts that we have been given in service to others;

that we must be constantly aware of opportunities to participate in God's work.

What opportunities in life might you miss because you are afraid to risk something?

What are you afraid of?

This past week I had an opportunity to hear Brian McLaren speak about his new book, “We Make the Road by Walking.”

The presentation started off with a poem by Antonio Machado: *Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; Wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking.*

*By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again.*

*Wanderer, there is no road-- Only wakes upon the sea.*

McLaren’s book is an attempt to reclaim Christianity as “the way” as it was called in the early centuries.

He claims that we are yet “in the making” with the freedom to learn, mature, think, change and grow.

We are also, McLaren argues, “free to stagnate, regress, constrict and lose our way.”

A point that he made that resonated with me was “what you focus on determines what you miss.”

This sentiment seems a direct commentary on our poor talent-burying servant in Matthew’s gospel.

This fellow missed the opportunity to be part of building God’s kingdom because he was paralyzed by his fear.

In his fear he clung to the status quo – clinging to what he knew, rather than venturing out to see what else might be there.

McLaren suggests that “faith was never intended to be a destination, a status, a holding tank or a warehouse.

Instead, it was to be a road, a path, a way out of old and destructive patterns into new and creative ones...

To be a living tradition, a living way, a spiritual community must forever open itself forward and forever remain unfinished –even as it forever cherishes and learns from the growing treasury of its past.”

My friends, whether we use the imagery of a road, a potter, or a talent, the message is clear.

God invites us into covenant.

God asks us to join in the creation story, to use our gifts and talents, whatever they might be, to build the kingdom.

Each one of us has been entrusted by the master with a resource to share – a treasure of our own.

This day, make a choice to invest that treasure, to share your gift to boldly follow ‘the way.’

Let us pray.

From We Make the Road by Walking:

With all our heart and with all our mind and with all our strength, let us pray to the living God:

For this good earth, this holy creation and for the wisdom and will to cherish, understand, reverence, rightly use, and conserve it we pray to the living God;

For all in danger, hunger, or sorrow, for the aged and infirm, the widowed and orphaned, the sick and suffering in body or mind, for prisoners and refugees, the poor and oppressed,

The unemployed and destitute, the bereaved and alone, the war-torn and wounded, and for all who care for them, we pray to the living God;

For all who hold positions of trust in the worlds of religion, education, government, business, community, culture and family that they may promote the well-being of all creation, we pray to the living God;

For any who have caused us pain, for those we struggle to understand and strain to love, for all who do not love us or who consider themselves our enemies, that they may be truly blessed and that we may be fully reconciled, we pray to the living God;

For ourselves and our circles of family and friends, for the grace to learn, desire, and do your will humbly in our daily life and work, we pray to the living God.

Living God, we turn to you now, in the sacred silence of this meeting house with the prayers of our hearts...

*Amen*