

FCUCC Sermon: November 19, 2023  
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Grace and Peace, First Congregational UCC Appleton – it's a joy to be here on Thanksgiving Sunday – and so I begin with deepest gratitude to our “flagship” Church (and your leaders) for your faithful commitment to the wider mission (and collaborative ministry) of the United Church of Christ – which allows all 210 congregations to share amazing gifts none of us could have alone:

Camps/Retreat Centers, Damascus Project (our on-line training programs)  
Staff support in pastoral searches and vision planning, clergy credentialing, global mission outreach, prophetic justice movements, shared values that, when pooled together, make an exponential impact on our society (but for voice of the UCC, some of God's children would not have an advocate.)

I bring greetings to you from your UCC siblings and rejoice with you in the news that soon a pastoral candidate will be named and a new chapter will unfold -- AMEN? Thanks be to God from whom all blessings flow!

That gets us to the Gospel ... a rather *judgy* passage from Matthew, who always seems a little preoccupied with the return of Christ (suggesting who gets to glimpse God's glory at the end of age) ... Such exclusion defies our understanding of Jesus) – yet story is less about condemnation (and more invitation.)

Today I want to talk about our common calling to be Spiritual Investors. In my teenage years I thought I might become a financial planner ... so I rounded up \$5,000 and put it into CD earning 13% (remember) . . . a few years later, I dabbled in the stock market (good old WI companies – Kohl's & Harley Davidson) – market took a dip and I lost my shirt and ended up a preacher!

But I never forgot the concept of taking something good and multiplying it! And it's always stuck with me that any investment of that which is inherently precious (family, faith, love & loyalty, time, talents or treasures) involves a risk – we could be hurt, get burned, be shamed, profoundly disappointed.

In the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter, Matthew delivers a rather curious passage about two servants who invest well and a third that buries his talent in a hole (and is ostracized because he has missed an opportunity to take a risk (multiply this wealth.)

A biblical talent was a measurement of money (a single talent was worth the the income of days labor over 20 years!) In this story, the man heading out on a journey entrusts 8 talents: 5 & 2 to servants did some day trading (doubling

their money) but 1 talent to the 3<sup>rd</sup> who was so protective (hoardingly so) that he buried it ... and when the owner returned, he lavishly praised the 2 with gains saying, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant, now I will entrust with even more!" ... But the poor guy whose fear got the best of him -- he got clobbered: "You wicked, lazy slave" - you could have at least gotten 2% in a money market (and then this awful ending:) "Throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" ... that's not very Jesus like (but remember the parables use hyperbole to speak of great judgement - who will enter the reign of Christ at end of age.)

I want to focus not on the judgement, but on the main point of the parable, which is, in fact not about stewarding finances, but rather stewarding the blessings God has given us .... Investing in our talent is a spiritual practice!

A little biblical and contemporary context around stewarding in terms of our natural orientation - if we see the proverbial cup half empty (Scarcity mentality) and if we see it half full (Abundance mentality) ... the scriptures often juxtapose our material worries about having enough (bigger barns) with our spiritual reality that with God there is always sufficiency (more grace than we need.)

It's been nearly 4 years since the start of the pandemic - accelerated decline of institutional church AND our need to adapt (by decade) .... Such change has brought profound loss, grief, anxiety, depression, fear (and that positions us naturally in a scarcity space) - on top of that, this congregation has suffered significant pastoral losses (death, retirement, departure) and while you have weathered the storms fairly well - they've taken a bit of a cumulative toll.

Part of cultivating a spirit of abundance (in midst of loss) is taking that tiny mustard seed faith and multiplying it (investing in hope, investing in trust, investing in the love of this community, investing in your promising future.)

In a few days, my dad (retired minister) turns 87 (he was raised aftermath WWII naturally had that "saving" mentality (conserves everything: reuses zip lock baggies!) and while he remains full of hope (he's so cautious about celebrating any achievement until it was "in the bag" ... well then I came along dreaming of all sorts of things I hoped might come to fruition (and he would always say, "Son, don't count your chickens until they hatch") ... finally, one day, I said to him, "Pop I've been counting my chickens before they hatch my entire life and lots hatched." So, long as God can lift me up and get me over my disappointments - I'm gonna keep on counting!" ... Spiritual Investing involves raising our sights, positively praying and leaps of faith!

Two final thoughts about investing our spiritual gifts remembering the words of Henry Van Dyke, "The woods would be very quiet if no bird sang except those who sang best."

First - it's helpful to take an inventory ... years ago I led a series of conversations in small groups around a curriculum called "Unwrapping your gifts" (Ron Farr). . . it involved spiritually discerning our God bestowed individual gifts ... not only was incredibly affirming (it was empowering because it compelled us to embrace our talents (and not hide under a bushel (Matthew 5:15) - some will be teachers, apostles, prophets, care givers, cake bakers, card senders, listeners, doers (as it says in Ephesians 4 - "...for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (all gifts you need are right before us.")

Second - once we name and claim our gifts there's a counter discovery ... it's helpful to know what our gifts are NOT .... and it's liberating to realize God doesn't expect you to cultivate that which has not been particularly planted in you (doesn't mean we don't try to develop some new skills) but it suggests God will raise up those around us who complement us!

Friends - in this Thanksgiving week with everything that pre-occupies us, I invite you to pause and give God thanks for the gift of your life (all you are and all you aren't --- You are enough. You are beloved ... a precious child of God.

Jesus said, I have come that you may have (not merely life) but life abundantly ... and so, invest in the *spiritual things* - doubling down on love, blessings one another with your beautiful gifts and bringing light and hope into this fragile and too often broken world. - Alleluia and Amen