"We Are Entrusted"
Matthew 25:14-30
November 15, 2020
Live-Streamed Worship,
United Christian Church, California PA

MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATIONS OF EVERY HEART BE ACCEPTABLE IN THY SIGHT, O LORD, OUR ROCK AND OUR REDEEMER. AND MAY A WORD THAT IS HEARD TODAY, LORD, BE YOURS.

I have struggled this week with the four lectionary texts and wrapping my head around a sermon. I can't really explain it, but I half-heartedly landed on the epistle text from 1 Thessalonians, and I struggled getting started. Then two extraordinary Holy Spirit moments hit me: one on Wednesday, the other on Thursday.

On Wednesday morning, I opened up this book that my son, Daniel, and his fiancé, Megan, gave me for my birthday. Daniel and I are both big fans of Fred Rogers. I have been using it for my Wednesday evening devotions I offer on our Facebook page. When I turned to where my bookmark had held the page from last week, I read the heading with some sadness: "Epilogue." An epilogue is written by an author to be placed at the end of a book; it is an opportunity to make a final statement or comment about the book. When I saw that word, I knew I had finished the book. The Holy Spirit moment was this: Amy Hollingsworth used a word that rang familiar to me. That word is "entrust." The word "entrusted" is in the first sentence of the Gospel text from Matthew for today. Ah! A connection!

So then I turned to a pastor's blog that I haven't look at in a while: Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt's "Dancing With The Word." In the search field, I typed in "Matthew 25:14-30," and by golly, she had written a new blog this week on this text! This week's blog is entitled, "Wasted Gifts and God's Grace." Grace! I had seen that word a lot this week in my reading for my theology course. The Holy Spirit was beginning to connect the dots for me. And I love it when that happens.

So, I changed my mind, happily, from 1 Thessalonians to Matthew 25. When I first read this portion from Matthew, I immediately turned my thoughts away from it, because wow, it ends in such an ugly way; a way that I don't like to think of when it comes to Jesus. Verse 30 ends this parable with these words: "As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." On Monday morning, I was in no mood for gnashing teeth.

As I mentioned earlier, it was the word "entrusted" in the epilogue of Amy Hollingsworth's book, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World's Most Beloved Neighbor*, that I recognized from the Matthew text. As I continued reading the Epilogue, I began to think about Jesus' parable differently. In fact, I didn't think about gnashing teeth at all.

Amy Hollingsworth loves words. She likes to think of herself as an etymologist: one who studies 'the origin of a word and the historical development of its meaning."[1] When she had the idea to write a book based on a friendship she developed with Fred Rogers after interviewing him – a friendship that lasted until his death, she thought about the word "entrust," and remembered it from 1 Timothy 6:20, when Paul writes: *"Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you."* Fred Rogers had entrusted much to her. So Amy went digging in her husband's library. Her husband is a pastor. She pulled his Greek text and discovered that the Greek text actually translates "entrust" with the word "deposit." Amy writes, "What was entrusted to Timothy's care was the Christian faith, and the word used to describe that entrusting was *deposit*."[2]

The Greek word for "deposit" is *paratheke (pah-rah-THAY-kay),* which means *a deposit committed to someone's trust.* We think of a deposit as something of value, like money, kept in a bank for safe-keeping. In the ancient world, such deposits were made at the temple, as back then, the temples were the banks.[3] In this parable from Matthew's gospel, a man is preparing for a long journey, and entrusts various amounts of money to three of his slaves. One was given five talents, invested them, and earned an additional five talents. Another was given two talents, invested them, and earned two more talents. The third servant, though, did not invest the one talent he was given. Instead he dug a hole in the ground and hid the talent. When the landowner returns, he is only pleased with the servants who made him more money than he left them. He was quite disappointed in the slave who buried his talent.

Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt wrote that she believes it was fear that kept that one talent buried in the ground. "I knew you were a harsh man," said the third servant. He was afraid of losing the principle on a bad investment. It was fear that motivated this slave to bury the money.[4] That fear blinded the servant to the whole point of the story: what the landowner gave to the servant was meant to be spent, to be invested.

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[1] "Etymology," Google Dictionary provided by Oxford Languages, https://www.google.com/search?ei=qBSuX7aBIaq5wKB2b34DQ&q=define+etymology&oq

[2] Amy Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers: Spiritual Insights from the World's Most Beloved Neighbor,* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 164.

[3] Hollingsworth, *The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers*, 164.

[4] Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt, "Wasted Gifts and God's Grace," *Dancing with the Word*, November 8, 2020, https://dancingwiththeword.com/wasted-gifts-and-gods-grace/

If the landowner in the parable represents God, what is it we're supposed to do with God's gift? Invest it? Or bury it? Janet Hunt and I – our takeaway of this parable – is this: "What God has so generously given us is not meant to be tucked away, hoarded or protected. It is meant to be spent, invested in the world and in one another, perhaps simply even given away."[5]

As Rev. Hunt sat with this parable from Matthew (that's what we pastors do, you know. We sit with the Holy Scriptures – a good bit), she found herself thinking a great deal about her dad, who in January – not long after Christmas one particular year. For his last Christmas, he gave each of his children a box of meat – as that's what he did for his life's work – he bought and sold meat. She didn't remember what was in that box, but it likely contained steaks, some hamburger, probably a roast or two. She came home from her family's Christmas gathering and put the box of meat in the freezer. When he died a few weeks later, the box of meat remained in the freezer. In her grief, she wasn't able to take the box out and open it. "Indeed," she wrote, "it sat there for weeks into months into the next year when it was time to clean out the freezer, and it was evident that it was ruined. Unable to be enjoyed. Fit only to be thrown away. Wasted."[6]

Hunt called her illustration "a simple example."[7] Certainly more simple than the parable Jesus used to try and get through to those who would listen. Yet the moral of each story is the same: Three are entrusted with wealth – or a box of meat – something of value. Two do something with that trust, and one did not. And in the end, the one who did nothing with it – who buried it – lost more than his master lost. As Hunt did. She lost much more than a box of frozen meat. She lost a gift from her dad, because her grief paralyzed her.

What have you lost? When you've let fear immobilize you, or pride, or the inability to forgive, or anger? What have you lost?

In the Introduction to Theology course I am taking, we have been studying The Reformation, and the writings of the men who lead the movement for change in the Roman Catholic Church, or from removal from that institution, and the beginning of Protestantism. One of those men was Erasmus of Rotterdam, who was born in 1466 and died in 1536. He was a Dutch theologian, a humanist, and a scholar. One of his famous amusing quotes was this simple phrase: "When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left I buy food and clothes."[8]

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[5] Hunt, "Wasted Gifts and God's Grace."

[6] Hunt, "Wasted Gifts and God's Grace."

[7] Hunt, "Wasted Gifts and God's Grace."

[8] William P. Anderson, *A Journey through Christian Theology with Texts from the First to the Twenty-First Century,* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 201.

Erasmus, who agreed with Martin Luther, the great reformer credited with nailing his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church door, also disagreed with him at times. He wrote an *Examination of Luther's Arguments (On the Freedom of Will)* and, in agreement with Luther, said this: "nor … does our will achieve nothing, although it does not attain the things that it seeks without the help of grace."[9]

Erasmus, Luther, Zwingli…these reformers believed that justification, or salvation, is not earned. There is nothing you or I can do, no matter how great or how helpful to society, that will earn us our salvation. Salvation is a gift of God's grace and love for us. It is as simple as that.

Erasmus differed from Luther, in his writings anyway, in believing that humans, with the free will God has given them, are capable and called to cooperate with God. He felt this cooperation is exactly what Paul was speaking of in Philippians 2:13 when he wrote "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure." (NRSV) Even in our free will, Erasmus believes, God works with us for good. We are called to cooperate with the Divine, to *choose* good over bad, to *choose* kindness over malice, to *choose* to help rather than to harm.

What do we choose to do with what we have been entrusted to care? Amy Hollingsworth took years of interviews and correspondences and conversations with Fred Rogers and wrote a book, detailing choices we can make with the gift of free will God has given us. Mr. Rogers called them "toast sticks," which was a comfort food that a kind, elderly neighbor used to make for him after school each day. She let him cut a slice of toast into four sticks, already slathered with butter and jam. That act of comforting kindness drove Amy's writings about the legacy Fred Rogers left us all:

- Toast Sticks for the Heart: taking the opportunity and making the effort to look within our own hearts, to seek God's will and guidance in prayer, and to honor and love ourselves as God loves us, so that we might better love others
- Toast Sticks for the Eyes: looking at ourselves honestly so that we might look at others honestly, seeking forgiveness so that we might offer forgiveness more freely, and seeing our neighbors – those whom we forgive, and from whom we seek mercy – as Jesus sees them: children of God

[9] Erasmus, "The Will Is Not Powerless Though It Cannot Attain Its End Without Grace," *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), as cited in Anderson, *A Journey through Christian Theology,* 207.

- Toast Sticks for the Hands: taking all of that love of Jesus, and all of the teachings of Jesus, and putting it to work – not for the sake of our own reward or salvation, but because reaching out and helping others is what Jesus did, and what we are called to do in His name. Reaching out and helping others is what Erasmus might consider cooperating with God for God's good will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Hollingsworth considered these lessons learned from Fred Rogers a gift that he entrusted to her. Or as she also considered the Greek translation of "entrust," Mr. Rogers made a deposit with her, one that she could have hidden away as treasures – letters that are likely worth money these days. Instead, she wrote a book, and touched my life with it. I suspect she has touched many lives with it.

Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt, like Erasmus, and I suspect, like Fred Rogers, believes that God's grace is a gift to us. It is God's deposit, entrusted to our care. If we choose to bury it, to hide it, or shove it to the back of our freezer unit in the basement, it dies. Grace dies. "Not only for the one for whom it would have made a world of difference, but also for the one who was given it to give away. It dies for the one who was entrusted to give it away, and it dies for the one meant to receive it. It dies – for me and for you.[10]

The Reformists believed that we are feeble humans who miss the mark every single day, so we have no hope of earning salvation on our own. But God loved us so much that God became one of us, and not only secured salvation for us, but also showed us how to cooperate with God's will, showed us how to care for our neighbor, showed us how to take what is entrusted to us and put it to good use for the glory of God, and for the good of us all.

We are entrusted with God's grace. If we can't offer grace to one another, we are failing one another. We who claim the name Christian, who claim to follow the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, need to do better. We are entrusted: entrusted to take God's gift and use it for good, today and every day. So be it. Amen.

[10] Hunt, "Wasted Gifts and God's Grace."