

**PILGRIM UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
Sunday, November 16, 2008 — Pentecost XXVII (Proper 28)
The Rev. John Tamilio, Senior Pastor**

**Sermon Title: “Lives of Thanksgiving”
Scripture Lesson: Matthew 25:14-30**

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There are certain biblical texts that challenge us more than others depending on when we read them. Have you looked at your 401k lately? I have. I'm not exactly ready to dance a jig. We all know that the market is deplorable right now. Some economists claim that it has not been this bad since The Great Depression — and no one knows when the market is going to rebound. You all know the story about falling stock values, Wall Street bailouts, and a crumbling real estate market.

I recall the words of my favorite theologian Karl Barth, who said that pastors should preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. Well, I know what *The Wall Street Journal* is saying, but what does The Bible say? I also recall the words of my homiletics professor from seminary who said, “Always ask yourself, ‘Where is God in the midst of this?’ when you face a difficult situation.”

What does The Bible say? And where is God in the midst of this? *What?* I do not quite like what Scripture *apparently* has to say to us today about the fiscal crisis!

Today's Gospel Lesson is a parable about investing. Three servants are given various amounts of talents before their master departs on a journey: one is given five, another is given two, and a third is given one. You know the story. You just heard it. The one who is given five talents invests them and reaps 100%. The one given two talents does the same thing. Now keep in mind, a talent was worth more than fifteen years of wages for a laborer. That's quite a bit of money — and quite a bit of return on the servants' investment. But what about the servant who was given just one talent? He dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. He chose not to invest it and, instead, gave it back to his master upon his return.

In this market, we are probably more like *that* servant: more cautious, less optimistic about investing in what seems *too* risky. But that was *not* the reasoning behind that servant's actions. He chose not to invest the master's money because he believed that the master was a "harsh man, reaping where he did not sew, and gathering where he did not scatter seed." That servant "was afraid, and...hid his talent in the ground," returning it to the master upon his return. As a result, the servant with the one talent is punished, whereas the other two are rewarded. *What are we to make of this?* Does God want us to make money? Does God want us to play the stock market? Does God want us to invest the money we have been given and return it to God and, if we don't, then we will be "thrown into outer darkness"? Is God really an investment banker instead of a loving Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer?

Maybe we will change our impression a bit if we think about the word "talent" differently... Although the word clearly signifies money in this parable, "talent" also means aptitude, capacity, and ability in our language. What if we impose *that* reading upon the text for a moment?

God has given each one of us a talent — or many talents. We are called, as members of the body of Christ, to use those talents for the upbuilding of the church. What does God think if we squander *those* talents — if we do not invest them for the betterment of the church? Although we will not be cast "into outer darkness," I bet God will not be pleased. God will hold us accountable. Maybe that is what this parable is saying to us today in a fresh way.

In his twelfth chapter in his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul wrote to a divided, competitive community explaining to them that every spiritual gift is needed for the body of Christ to be complete. No gift is more important than any other. Every gift is indispensable. "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many...If all were a single member, where would the body be?"¹ Have we been given five gifts, like the servant who has been given five talents? She invests them in a life that takes advantage of everything she has been given, reaping a discipleship that works five times as hard to share God's love with others. Have we been given two

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:14, 19 (NRSV).

gifts, like the servant who has been given two talents? He invests them and reaps a discipleship that works twice as hard to make God's realm a reality here and now. The late American lay preacher S. D. Gordon once wrote, "We have nothing to do with how much ability we've got, or how little, but with what we do with what we have...Our part is to be faithful, doing the...best with every bit and scrap."²

To me, this is a matter of stewardship. Stewardship is not just about giving a portion of our financial resources to the church, although that is certainly a significant aspect of stewardship. Stewardship is the giving of our whole selves to the church: our time and talents, as well as our treasure. *That is why Pilgrim decided to include a Time and Talent survey on the back of our pledge cards this year.* You've all heard the old mantra of stewardship: by giving our financial resources to the church, we are returning to God a portion of the blessings that God has already given to us. But think about it: before we were blessed with the roof over our heads, the clothes on our backs, or the money in our pockets, we were blessed with our lives. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," wrote the prophet.³ If our lives are the ultimate gifts that God has given to us, then that should be the ultimate gift that we offer to God, should it not? We should offer lives of thanksgiving in return for the grace, the love, and the blessings that God has poured into our lives.

If you visit the website for Community Church United Church of Christ in Corona del Mar, California you will see that they spell this out best in their explication of Spiritual Disciplines.⁴ "We try to practice a number of spiritual disciplines," they write. "These practices are not meant to impress God or attract God's favor — rather, they allow us gradually to receive and experience the growth God intends in the life of every believer. By definition, a 'discipline' does not exist for its own sake. Christian disciplines free us and train us to become, by the power of the Holy Spirit, people living effectively in accordance with the day-to-day will of God." And then, one of the disciplines they list is *vocatio*, from which we get our word

² Samuel Dickey Gordon (1859-1936), *The Bent-Knee Time*.

³ Jeremiah 1:5a (NRSV).

⁴ The following quotes are from www.cdmucc.com/spiritual_disciplines.html.

vocation — another way of saying *discipleship*. “When by grace we offer our lives to God, we are each given a new individual purpose. We remain restless until we begin to pursue our lifelong ‘God assignment;’ we become fulfilled as we obey God’s unique mission for us.” This is sound theology: by virtue of our baptism, we were blessed with a spiritual gift — some with several gifts — that we are called to use for the upbuilding of the church.

Now when we talk about such things — offering lives of thanksgiving to the church and to God — we often talk about the laity, as we should. But what about pastors? That’s a given. *They are supposed to do that!* But sometimes it is important to pause and recognize such people, especially in this season of giving thanks. I am not talking about myself here. I am talking about the two people who have been a part of Pilgrim much longer than I have: the people who have been pillars of leadership throughout our interim period. I am, of course, talking about Pastor Tricia Gilbert and Pastor Patrick Nicolino. I would like to invite them to come forward. I would also like to invite Jeffrey Woodard to come forward to make a presentation and to share some words of appreciation...

JEFFREY WODDARD

This sermon is not just a lead-in to a presentation. It is about leading by example. Two weeks ago we spoke about The Saints (All Saints Day). *That conversation continues today.* The saints are you and me — those who lead by example. The saints are those who are thankful for the lives that God has given them by living lives of thankfulness. They capitalize on their spiritual gifts and offer them to God to ensure the longevity of the church and to reach out to all who seek shelter within her walls. And furthermore, calling this *a life of thanksgiving* means it is continuous. As Pope Shenouda III, the Head of the Holy Synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church writes in his book *The Life of Thanksgiving* “our giving thanks to God has no specific occasions but it is ‘Always.’ And as long as it is continuous, it covers the whole life and therefore the expression ‘Life of Thanksgiving’ applies to it. The same teaching was explained in the first epistle of the Thessalonians, ‘Rejoice always, pray without

ceasing, in everything give thanks.”⁵ In everything give thanks. In your worship. In your prayers. In your life. In every waking moment. Give thanks. Amen.

⁵ His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, *The Life of Thanksgiving* (Sydney: C.O.P.T., 1993), 7.