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“You are Not Alone” The Rev. Dr. Andrew Armond (11/19/2023, Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost)

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Let us pray.

Almighty God, may the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of all of our hearts  
be acceptable in your sights, O Lord,  
our strength and our redeemer,  
in the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

I wanna begin with the elephant in the room,  
which is that these are some really hard scriptures,  
and it's on a day when our collect,  
which was written by Thomas Krammer,  
it's this beautiful passage,  
he says, blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures  
to be written for our learning.

Even these, even these.

And so I wanna keep that in mind.

He doesn't say who has caused all holy scriptures  
to be taken in one particular way.

Or to have one particular meaning,  
but to be written for our learning.

So what can we learn?

What can we learn?

I wanna stick to think about that this morning.

Okay, it is something that millions of Americans do  
every year.

It is something that has a low risk  
and the possibility of great reward.

It is something potentially life-changing  
in many powerful ways.

It is something that people often daydream about  
when they are upset or down on their luck.

And generally, it is something that makes most people  
very, very unhappy.

I'm talking of course about winning the lottery.

According to recent statistics,

70% of lottery winners end up right where they started  
after five years.

Most end up divorced after a few years,  
arguing about how to spend or invest such a huge sudden  
and immense sum is really hard on a relationship.  
Some find that it is literally impossible  
to keep their old friends or to have any friends.  
Because they have so much trouble figuring out  
what their motives are and they feel like they can't  
trust anyone.

Some become targets for the more unsavory people  
in their lives, suffering crimes from petty theft  
to attempted murder.

And on a more existential level,  
there's the loss of meaning and purpose  
that can come from this sudden change of circumstances.  
People make with their jobs, which can feel great  
for a few months.

And then what?

What to do?

There's the question of simply what to do  
with every single day.

Boredom can set in as well as the challenge  
of not having any adversity in life  
or at least the type of adversity that we think we would have.

And people don't feel the satisfaction  
of having to get through those difficult moments in life.

When Jesus was a boy, maybe around the same time  
that he was found by his parents wandering around the temple  
for three days, that Roman poet Avid was writing  
his poem Metamorphosis, which collected thousands of years  
of Greek and Roman myths into a single work.

One of those myths tells the story of King Midas,  
the fabled Greek king who as a reward for his hospitality  
was granted a wish by the God of wine, Dionysus.

Midas asked that everything he touched  
would be turned to gold.

Granted, this wish it soon became a horror.

Is he realized that not only would he be able  
to create this immense wealth,  
but also that he would never be able to eat or drink again?  
Since even his own food would turn to gold  
before he could eat it.

In some versions of the myth,  
the curse of the golden touch was reversed  
after much prayer and supplication,  
and other versions might as even turn to his own daughter into gold.

And in one version, Midas dies of starvation,  
never being able to overcome the curse of his own desire.

So the myth becomes a cautionary tale  
about what the desire for wealth can do to a person.

In fact, a metaphor for how wealth can corrupt

even the good things in our lives,  
even at the point of alienating or turning to gold  
our friends and families.

Midas is intensely lonely,  
having only more and more gold to pointlessly  
console him after all.

It's possible that we have no way of knowing this  
that Jesus may have heard at some point the myth of King Midas.  
So the pious Jews he was surrounded with  
would have rejected all such pagan tales.

Nevertheless, when Jesus does talk about money,  
he often does so with hugely exaggerated sums  
in order to make a larger point  
that's actually not about money at all.

It's about God's extravagant grace,  
the free gift of God's love that flows from God's very heart  
into all people.

Regardless of their wealth, their status,  
the exterior image that they have so carefully curated.  
God's grace is truly reckless, heedless,  
and even foolish according to St. Paul.

So much so that we really have trouble  
most of us believing just how fortunate we really are.

Talent was a weight of gold, a terribly large sum  
and a really impractical amount of money to be honest.  
One talent was about 70 to 100 pounds of gold.

The equivalent of the amount of money a day labor  
in Jesus' time would have made in 30 years.

If you were given one talent,  
you would never have to work again.

Being given one talent was equivalent to winning the lottery.  
You were set.

No more labor, no more worry, no more toil,  
no more stress, no more leaky roots,  
no more squeaking by, but the same paltry meal.

Day after day, by some measures,  
one talent would be roughly equivalent  
between one and a half and two million dollars today.

A life changing sum for anyone,  
but especially for a laborer.

More, in fact, than they would know what to do with.  
Two talents, of course.

I know we can do the math, would have been twice as much.  
And five talents was a simply astronomical sum.

Unimaginably large.

An equally unimaginable in this story  
is whatever these servants did,  
these day laborers to double this gift,  
taking four million to eight million,  
or 10 million to 20 million,

even the most savvy trader in first century Palestine  
would have had trouble doubling this investment.  
And so you can imagine the humor  
in this rather dark parable of Jesus  
the investors come back to the master  
with their 10 talents to show him.  
It's a thousand pounds of gold.  
What are they carrying it in?  
A wheeled arrow, a donkey cart.  
It really is beyond conception,  
the heaviness of this prize that the servant carries.  
And it's funny when Jesus says,  
you have done well with a little.  
A little?  
The weight of this, it really is too big.  
It is too heavy, it is too ridiculous to imagine.  
There are many ways to think about this story,  
but I want us to think about the idea of desire  
and longing and fulfillment today.  
I was reminded this week of C.S. Lewis's sermon,  
The Weight of Glory,  
in which talks about the idea that one day  
in our ultimate fulfillment as the sons and daughters  
and children of God, we will hear God say to us,  
well done, my good and faithful servant.  
That is the weight of glory,  
the crowning of our life with eternal life,  
the translating of everything we are into something more,  
something deeper, something more beautiful and whole  
than we could possibly imagine.  
God loves us and we know this  
and we hear this all the time.  
And I like the way that C.S. Lewis puts it in this sermon  
because it's just off enough like the parables of Jesus  
that it causes us to pay attention.  
Lewis says, God sees us, you and me,  
as a real ingredient in God's happiness,  
that we are a real ingredient in God's happiness.  
God is pleased with us,  
God is childlike in His pursuit of us,  
God will not rest until we have all come to maturity  
until we are all an integral part of God's  
eternal joy.  
This seems impossible, Lewis says,  
it is a weight or burden of glory  
which our thoughts can hardly sustain.  
But so it is.  
Imagine with me then that we have each been gifted a talent  
and immense wealth, not of course of gold or earthly wealth,  
but something deeper and ultimately much more significant.

A gift of love, a gift of life,  
a sense that each one of us has had at some point  
that there is something deeply significant  
and beautiful about life,  
even through its various challenges and sadnesses  
and tragedies.

Imagine too then that sense that you may have felt at times  
when everything in life seemed to line up,  
when you glimpsed, even for a moment,  
the vision of knowing your place in the universe,  
a feeling that you were significant,  
that you were loved, that you were in the exact right time  
and place that you were supposed to be.

This may have happened on a trip  
when you breathed in the cool mountain air  
or in the stillness and quiet of a desert landscape  
or when your child was born  
or even when you read a really good book  
and closed its final page, satisfied in a way  
that seemed surprising to you at the time.

It was so lovely.

What Lewis talks about, what this talent may signify  
is that sense of profound grace,  
simply the grace of existence  
that can enter our lives in all kinds of surprising ways.  
And it has something to do with desire as well  
because when we experience those moments,  
we want them to last,  
fleeting though they are.

We want like Jesus's friends did  
on the amount of transfiguration to build a tent,  
to stay there.

We desire even more than we know we can desire,  
something beyond.

And so what would it take to multiply  
that sense of giftedness,  
that sense of being in the right place,  
that feeling of being overwhelmed  
at the grace of existence and love  
and forgiveness and acceptance that God gives us?

I have a book, it's 1595.

I'm gonna put some in the back and on your way out,  
you can buy them and they'll tell you exactly  
the answer to that question.

And they'll give you the right spiritual techniques  
to perform so that you can double your investment  
in the kingdom.

Hallelujah.

It's not that easy and yet it is.

I think with most things dealing with Jesus,

the answer is that it is something really small  
like a mustard seed  
and something seemingly insignificant.  
And I think it's gratitude.  
Gratitude seems to be the key to this spiritual return,  
this miraculous investment,  
the means by which we multiply the gift.  
Gratitude is not work and it's not a means  
of earning our salvation,  
but it's an intentional act of thanksgiving for the talent,  
for the gift, for the immensity of it.  
Gratitude multiplies the gift  
because it requires us to notice all the ways  
in which God is already active in our lives,  
all the ways in which God is already loving us  
and those around us,  
all the ways in which God is already using us  
to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.  
And when we do that, when we notice, we notice more  
to those who have much, much is given.  
When we pay attention, we see more.  
When we practice gratitude, we find more  
to be thankful for.  
Now, I'm not just talking about counting our blessings.  
Sometimes the gift doesn't look like a gift at first.  
Sometimes we struggle through the situation  
and only find the gratitude and grace  
on the other side of it.  
In fact, I think that's how it works most of the time,  
but the grace is still there, even in the challenge,  
even in the darkest corners of our lives.  
And yes, sometimes we bury the talent.  
Sometimes we are simply afraid of the immensity  
of God's love.  
We are afraid of grace.  
We don't forgive ourselves.  
We don't see ourselves in the way that God sees us  
as precious, as lovely, as beautiful children of God.  
Necessary to God's happiness, as Lewis says,  
we don't think that God could be so very loving  
as to seek after us in order to love us as we are.  
To bury the talent is to refuse to acknowledge  
the gift nature of existence.  
It is to imagine God as a cruel taskmaster,  
and unfortunately, as does in the parable,  
this can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.  
When we see the gifts as curses,  
when we imagine that God is out to get us,  
that is often what we see and what we get.  
And so we bury not only the talent, but ourselves,

fearful and lonely.

The black gospel singer Mavis Staples put it best,  
and her 2010 single, you are not alone.

A broken home, a broken heart, isolated and afraid.

Open up.

This is a raid.

I want to get it through to you.

You're not alone.

Even in the darkest moments of my own life,

I have been grateful for the grace of God.

Breaking down the doors of my heart,

seeking after me and finding me,

even when I am buried, isolated and afraid.

Sometimes it takes a raid,

but God will get it through to us, to each one of us.

We are not alone.

We are loved.

We are gifted.

We are graced.

We are not alone.

Amen.