



The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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A preacher knows she's in trouble when the Scriptures appointed for the day include an Old Testament Hebrew Scripture passage that ends with the destruction of the entire world and all of its inhabitants meet a full and terrible end; followed by a gospel lesson where one is thrown into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. How's that for good news today?! While I was very sorely— very sorely— tempted to seek a passage that had a more overt message of hope, I felt myself drawn to that challenging gospel lesson today. So I invite you to journey with me on what is happening in that story and, in some ways even more importantly, what does it have to say to us today.

As with all Scripture, it's helpful to put things in context. That gospel lesson is part of the fifth and final major section of teaching that Jesus engages in as written in the gospel of Matthew. It comes in a category that scholars call the Eschatological Discourse. Well, that's a very fancy theological term for essentially dealing with issues like death and judgment and the Second Coming of Christ. Scholars say that we're to understand that gospel lesson essentially as an allegory where the man or master represents Jesus; the servants are the disciples, members of the church—read you and me—and that the property is all about the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of God that's been entrusted to the servants and to you and me for the up-building of the Kingdom.

Let me tell you what the parable is not about. It is not a tutorial on the risks and reward of investing in hedge funds versus a certificate of deposit. That's not what's going on in the story. Beloved preacher and professor at Harvard Peter Gomes said that the story seems to place a “premium not on how to use and spend money,” but rather, “on how to use and spend time.” When you look at the arc of that last section of teaching, Jesus seems to be saying that how we live our lives in the meantime matters and it matters greatly.

I'm reminded of one of my favorite cartoons that is in my office. It pictures Jesus just about to open a door and the caption reads, “Look busy, Jesus is coming!” But more seriously, it does deal with how we use

what we've been given." (Gomes) In the parables about time, Jesus warns that what matters most is not about "how we anticipate the future but how we use the time that we have, what resources we are given and how we redeem the present." (Gomes) That the story of the parable of the talents "has nothing to do with investment and everything to do with engagement (Gomes) of what we have; how we use it where we are. In essence, how to live a full and purposeful life, not just in the life to come, but now, today, in our time, in our place.

A very thoughtful explication of how to live the fullness of our lives is captured by Franciscan Richard Rohr in his book *Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*. Rohr posits the view that in the first half of our lives that most of us are pretty actively engaged in settling on our identity and trying to make our mark. We're really busy trying to achieve, to accomplish, to succeed. We're building this mountain that encapsulates our identity or at least how society would attempt to identify us. But there comes a time when we begin to ask different questions. What does all this mean? What is all this for? What is the purpose and meaning in my life?

Rohr says that it's difficult to get out of that preoccupation of the first half of our life because we're so wedded to it that it often takes a falling, if you will; a failure, if you will; the loss of a job; the loss of a loved one; perhaps a health crisis. And that when what is building falls away, we are invited to go more deeply and hopefully with grace, let go of some of that. And to live more fully into whom God created us to be in the first place. He talks about the second half of life, if we can get there, as one full of grace and essentially not a building up but a pouring forth, an agape, selfless love.

That sense of a full life with two halves was so personified for me by a dear friend, a friend of many, many years, who in his vocational life was engaged in public service both here and abroad and he was widely recognized worldwide for all that he had done and all he had accomplished. He was an extraordinary human being. And when he retired, he didn't slow down. He didn't go play golf—he didn't do some of these other things. It wasn't a decline. He just continued to rise. He dedicated his life to big issues in our world, things that God had placed on his heart and he gave himself fully to it: time, talent, treasure. He poured himself out for others.

When he was in his 90s he got cancer and at one point it became fairly clear that cancer was winning that battle and I made a date to go see him. When I showed up at the house, his wife answered the door—also a very dear friend, who like her husband, gave and gave and gave. She said, "Jan, he's told me that he wants to

have some one-on-one time with you, so I just wanted to give you a heads up.” Well, that’s not an uncommon request for someone who sees that their earthly life is coming to an end. Often they’ll wish to engage in conversation about their life or reflection in looking back on the good times, the bad times, perhaps some regrets, a confession sometimes. It may be a time in which they want to engage in some assurance that the loved ones they leave behind are going to be okay.

So after the three of us had shared communion, his wife excused herself and he was propped up in bed, cheery. I pulled my chair close and I had, you know, prepared myself for what I knew would be a sacred conversation. But nothing in my experience made me ready for what followed. He looked at me and asked, “Jan, I want your advice. I want to know what I can do to help. You know, there are big problems out there and I can’t get out of the house really very much anymore and it’s probably not very practical for me to write letters. But I do have things I can do. How would you direct me?” I tried to hold back my tears. Can you imagine? This man, who was looking at his earthly end, and he was not preoccupied with what he could no longer do or the limited number of his days. He was totally focused on what he could continue to give, to pour himself out for others. I knew I was standing on holy ground. He taught me then, he continues to teach me today.

How we live our lives in the meantime matters. It was John Wesley who said, do all the good that you can, in all the ways that you can, to all the people that you can, for as long as you can. May it be so, for you and for me.

Amen.