

## OUR CALLING HAS JUST BEGUN

*the Rev. Seth Patterson*

*Minister for Spiritual Formation & Theater*

*November 15, 2020*

**Text: Matthew 25:14–30 (abridged)**

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole and hid the money. After a long time, the giver of the talents returned. The one who had received the five talents came forward saying, ‘You handed over to me five talents and I have made five more talents.’ He replied, ‘Well done, you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘You handed me two talents; I have made two more talents.’ He received the same commendation. Then the one who had received the one talent said, ‘I knew that you were a harsh person, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid this talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ The reply came, ‘You wicked and lazy person! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested the money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless person, throw them into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

\* \* \*

Before I enter into the primary stream of today’s sermon, there are two other things I feel compelled to say: The first is a necessary public-service announcement with whatever gravitas might be attached to this pulpit. Our current moment with COVID-19 is being described as our house being on fire. This is extremely serious, and I urge us all to continue to remain extremely cautious. If you are feeling tired of life in this pandemic, please understand that we are all weary. If you don’t like wearing a mask, please understand that everyone finds it at least somewhat uncomfortable. If you are grieving the losses of things and experiences from your life before March, please remember that we are all carrying loss from this. None of us are an exception. Please help us put out this fire by wearing a mask, staying home whenever possible and following public health protocols. I understand that most of you understand this already, but it cannot be said enough right now.

The next thing is an acknowledgement. Where I stand right now, at the corner of Nicollet and Franklin in Minneapolis, is Dakota land. Here, in this part of the state we now call Minnesota, is where the stories of Dakota people begin. This land was stolen, and we have not yet repaired that historical damage. Despite centuries of colonial theft and violence, this is still Indigenous land. May we continue to acknowledge this, begin to act in partnerships as the stewards of land that came to us through illegitimate means and work to repair the damage that continues today.

How did it feel to hear these two things? What did you do when you heard it?

My daughter used to roar at us. When she was upset she would roar in frustration. To be clear, she wouldn't make a roaring sound, she would angrily say the word *roar* to us. ROAR! When she heard something she didn't like, her initial reaction was to say "Roar!" My spouse will growl under her breath, something like a grumbling sigh. When I hear things I don't want to hear, I am often pretty quiet, except I will want to throw something. Nothing dangerous of course, but if there is a pen in my hand, that thing is going to get hurled to the ground! What do you do when you hear something you don't like? If you don't know, then it is pretty certain that your child, parent, sibling, partner or good friend will easily be able to tell you. What do you do?

In the lead-up to this election, we all heard things we didn't like and very likely exhibited our unconscious reaction. And this has continued post-election. It doesn't matter for whom you voted, there is a lot right now that we do not like to hear, that we don't want to hear, that makes us do our version of a roar. It is part of being in community with other people that we will often hear things we don't want to hear, and this current moment seems to have increased the flame on this.

Yet this coincides with laments about our stark and apparent division. We hear cries for unity and healing. There are conversations about how we might bridge this chasm, how we repair broken relationships, how we approach the challenges of our time together instead of in separation. Yet we still hear things that are frustrating and angering, things that make us roar and throw pens.

I had just such a reaction when I read this parable from the Book of Matthew. Wow, I do not like this parable. I struggle to make meaning out of it. Primarily, it's because it says, "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." I have deep pains about those lines. It strikes me as supporting greedy behaviors and commodifies people. It confuses me that this parable is by the same Jesus who says in Mark, "Go and sell all you possess and give to the poor." I eye with suspicion anything in the Bible that deals with celebrating the accumulation of wealth. Plus, anything that describes a punishment like we see here is concerning to me. "As for this worthless person, throw them into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." How does this line up with the practices of love that are so prominent in the books regarding Jesus? If God loves us all unconditionally, how can someone be called worthless?

I read this parable that was in the lectionary for today and I wanted to throw my pen and choose something else. A roar felt appropriate. I wanted to ignore it. And I could have, as there were other choices to preach from. Similarly, each of us can often choose the ways to hear what we want to hear and avoid what we don't. But this retreat into these more comfortable spaces will not help us in the long run, it will not help us be people together. I decided that I couldn't ignore something from our sacred text just because it was frustrating and made me uncomfortable. If I am going to participate in any useful way in this call for national healing and unity, then I had better be prepared to enter into conversations that might challenge me in unexpected ways.

This participation is easier for some than for others. Each of us has our own threshold for discomfort and frustration. And we certainly do need to avoid spaces that are unsafe and always take care of ourselves. But maybe it is too easy for all of us to avoid situations of dislike and discomfort. After we roar, we often prefer to turn our backs.

Yet entering into these vulnerable and potentially frustrating places can be unexpectedly beautiful and meaningful. I was fortunate to sit in one of those places recently. The Racial Justice Initiative is piloting a program called This I Believe/Making Racial Justice Personal. To begin, five of us wrote a fairly short statement in which we attempted to answer the question of why doing the work of racial justice was important to us. After we each wrote our own—each quite unique from the others—we gathered together for a virtual roundtable. Facilitated by a gifted retired professor, the process was that we had 20 minutes

to discuss each statement. The challenge was that the author tried to be silent and just receive the feedback. This was at times vulnerable, and I am sure we all heard things that we didn't want to hear. I know I did.

Yet transformation came in that time of listening. I didn't like everything that was said about my writing, and I didn't agree with all of the suggestions that were given to me. But I was transformed by actively listening, by taking in other people's thoughts when they contrasted from my own. The entire process was kind and respectful and safe. I learned something about myself and the others at the table by listening to what I didn't want to hear. In the coming year we will all be invited to participate in this program, and I urge you all to accept the invitation as it is transformational and important.

Transformation can be possible when we allow ourselves to listen to what we might not want to hear. It's not about avoiding these roar moments—they are instinctual and natural and a helpful release—but about what we do next. Do we allow ourselves the chance to grow and learn, or do we turn our backs?

After I threw my pen about this parable, I tried to sit in it and let it be transformative. I thought about how I could learn from it instead of just rejecting it. I still don't like this parable, I still disagree with it, but I began to find some meaning in it. I began to play with the question of where God could be. I am now able to make some meaning out of this parable when I see God not as the rich person but rather as the gift itself, the talents. If God is the gift, then I can make some meaning from the idea that we are each given the gift of a God that loves us more than we can imagine. We then can grow that gift by spreading the abundance of God's love to others in our community. If we choose to not spread the love and abundance of God, then we will feel loss and emptiness and gnash our own teeth. The only way that I could make meaning out of this piece of sacred text was to sit in its discomfort. I allowed myself to disagree yet still listen. Maybe you will come to a different meaningful conclusion if you sit in it for a bit.

If we are to answer the calls for healing and unity in our communities right now, then I suspect we may need to practice what we do after we roar. How do we safely sit in the discomfort of what we may not want to hear, what we don't agree with? Our calling is not to like everything we hear but to act with love to those we are in disagreement with. We are called to listen deeply and be willing to be transformed. I keep hearing in political spaces that our work is just beginning. I wonder instead if we can say that our calling has just begun. We are called to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and love the other as we love ourselves. We are called to listen deeply even when—especially when—we do not agree with what we hear. We are called to heal and transform and make meaning out of life's difficulties. Maybe our calling has just begun . . .

Poet and Plymouth member Jim Lenfestey begins a powerful poem this way, asking the question in a different way: "I carry the grief of the world in a joyful body. What should I do?"

What do you do? What do you do after your roar? How does your calling to listen and transform and act in love show up in your life? How may you find God in the unexpected places? Maybe your calling has just begun.