

Riverside United Church
March 2, 2025

Scripture Lesson: Luke 19: 11-29

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“What We are Meant to Do and Be: #5 -“To Bring Hope to Every Task You Do”

How do we invest compassion and hope into a world that seems so polarized by power and paralyzed by fear?

The season of Epiphany - the season where we focus on the revelation of Holy Light into our world draws to a close, as the season of Lent begins on Wednesday. When Epiphany began back in January, I thought the Epiphany sermon series would include 7 sermons, but here we are at number 5, due to a week of sickness and a snow storm. We are using phrases from Jim Strathdee’s hymn, I am the Light of the World, which is based on a Howard Thurman poem.

I think my favourite phrase in this hymn is “to bring hope to every task you do”. I think one of the most challenging phrases in this hymn is “to bring hope to every task you do.”

As I was crafting this sermon series, I decided to use parables of Jesus from the gospel of Luke to inform these poetic phrases that help us to discover the mystery of what we are meant to do and to be. And for this focus phrase I thought about the parable of the talents/pounds and how different characters respond to investing their gift.

I do have a confession to make. When I thought of this parable, I was thinking of Matthew’s version and didn’t really pay attention to the differences from Matthew to Luke’s version. I should have paid more attention. In Luke’s version, there is more going on and it is more violent and judgmental than Matthew’s. One of constant contexts of reading a gospel story is hearing it as Jesus audience might have heard it, but also remembering that a second audience is reading the gospel at the time it is written, about 30-40 years later. One of the realities of those contexts was an expectation of the imminent end of the world and for many Jesus was the going to be ushering in the end.

Scholars believe that this parable actually combines a couple of stories in the oral tradition, and so it would have been simpler if I had paid more attention and chosen Matthew’s parable.

But, in the parable we hear that a gap before return of the nobleman or king, and so what happens in the meantime, matters. Jesus may have been helping the disciples and followers to ask: How do we invest compassion and hope into a world that seems so polarized by power and paralyzed by fear? This parable does seem to convey the important teaching that in the meantime, we do not sit around and wait in fear, but invest into the world so that the gifts of God multiply.

This story can be interpreted that we invest so that we can be rewarded, but that emphasis can lead to some pretty selfish understandings. Jesus was constantly speaking about working to bring about the kingdom of God. We live with glimpses of kingdom moments and truths, but we also can get quite discouraged when we pay attention to what is happening in our society and world.

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And yet our Epiphany invitation today is “bring hope to every task you do”.

I was listening to a podcast recently and it was talking about the stress and strain of helping professions, and someone used the phrase, “the emotionally expensive professions?”. As I have been thinking of that phrase, I think it is a broader description of reality for many people. Life can be emotionally expensive, especially in a time such as this when we are disturbed by political trends and tempted to despair. It can be exhausting to be paying attention in our world. As I mentioned in an email a few weeks ago, I loved the quote I saw that said, “My need to know what is going on is conflicting with my need to stay sane.” Paying attention these days is emotionally expensive.

So, how do we bring hope into our tasks and daily routines? How we recharge our emotional resilience so that we do don’t bury ourselves in despair and fear?

I have always been fascinated with the concept and gift of hope and yet I have trouble finding words to define it. There is a hymn verse that helps: Hope is living present as a people being led. Hope is finding is the commonplace life sustaining bread.

So maybe how we bring hope to every task we do, is to know and offer what is life sustaining: purpose, meaning, love, compassion, acceptance, dignity, community, joy, peace.

Jesus’ teachings offer wisdom and questions that help us to move deeper than the surface truth of a reality or situation. His commitment to the truth of love reminds us to not to get distracted by some of expensive emotions that don’t lead us to fullness of life. His story of death and resurrection offer the ultimate example of hope, as his death was not the end of his life or influence. The power of resurrection for us as seekers and followers of Jesus is that resurrection is not just a reality after death, but is known in our lives and world as new life comes out of dormant or dead realities, as we find glimpses of light amidst times of confusion and uncertainty, as we are renewed with energy and possibility even when we feel that we are at a dead end.

The power or resurrection is that growth and life can emerge out of even that which is dead. We see that in the wonder and beauty of creation and we can see that in our human stories where new life emerges in community and new energy in our hearts and souls.

The gift of hope can be rare in these days and so we are invited to reflect on how we can bring hope to every task we do. I am not sure about some tasks - like washing dishes or sorting papers - but I think we get the idea.

As I have been thinking about why this is one of my favourite phrases in the hymn, I think about ways that I seek to live with hope. One of the ways is in making connections between people, between ideas, between stories - so that human connection happens intentionally in gatherings, meetings, etc.

Another way I seek to embody hope is through humour. I enjoy seeing some of the fun aspects of a situation and try to build community and connection through humour in appropriate ways. There have been times when my attempt at humour has fallen flat or offended someone, so I tend to be more careful.

Another way that I seek to bring hope with me is to remember that resurrection truth that there are possibilities for change, for transformation in a situation, if we reflect, imagine, pray, experiment.

It is not always easy to live in hope. Despair can be overwhelming. Life can be emotionally expensive and so we need to nourish and enrich the well of our trust, our vision, our focus, our soul so that hope, love and joy

come from a deep place of meaning, of story, of faith, of worth.

Being a follower of Jesus is a constant process of learning, of discovering, of reflecting, of re-evaluating, of giving, of transforming. We follow the light of the world so that we can discover the mystery of what we are meant to do and to be.

This being human journey is filled with wonder, complexity and mystery and we are invited to live into it with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. There are other paths of purpose and meaning for life and some of them are as spiritually deep as the path of Jesus. But, many of them are not. Our world is filled with choices of shallow paths that promise success, happiness, power, wealth. But, they are not paths of eternal truth and love.

How do we invest compassion and hope into a world that seems so polarized by power and paralyzed by fear?

As seekers and followers of Jesus, we are invited to invest our lives with the hope that invites and proclaims resurrection. Amen.