

Three Parables
 Matthew 25
 June 14, 2009
 First Federated Church
 Peoria, Illinois
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 Sermon Notes

Last things seem to take on greater importance in life. No one wants to take the last cup of coffee in an office because that means that they will have to make the next pot. The last bit of milk is left in the carton and put back in the fridge, lest someone has to throw it out. Kids will argue over the last cookie. On a more important scale, people often ask “What were his last words?”

This morning I am going to share with you an opportunity that the Missions Committee has to the members and friends of First Federated Church. But first, some famous last words. I ran across them while researching this morning’s sermon.

What does this button do?
 It’s probably just a rash.
 Are you sure the power is off?
 The odds of that happening have to be a million to one!
 Pull the pin and count to what?
 Which wire was I supposed to cut?
 I wonder where the mother bear is?
 I’ve seen this done on TV.
 I’ll hold it and you light the fuse.
 This doesn’t taste right.
 Nice doggie.
 I can do that with my eyes closed.
 And my favorite, the famous last words of a red neck, “Hey everyone, watch this!”

Our lessons today are among Jesus’ last words—his final teachings—to his disciples in the gospel of Matthew. You may recall that the last thing he said to them was to go and make disciples. Prior to that he shared, in rapid fire succession, a series of parables about the last days.

The story really begins in chapter 24 when Jesus and his disciples were walking out of the Temple.

The Temple was not just one building but a whole series of interconnected structures that took up what we would consider several city blocks. It was a featured landmark of Jerusalem, kind of like the Twin Towers were in New York City. The disciples marveled at the grandeur of the place. It was the pride of Israel, if not the whole Middle East.

By way of background, the first Temple was built during the reign of Solomon. It was destroyed with the fall of the city in 587 B.C.

A second Temple in Jerusalem was constructed on the ruins a generation or so later. Herod extensively remodeled and beautified it around the year 19 B.C. It was a

bustling place filled with the sounds of the religious and the commercial. The disciples were thrilled to be there. They were awed at its breath-taking beauty and said so.

I almost get the feeling that Jesus was someone distracted and that they had interrupted his thoughts. He looked around, and rather than being awe-struck, he was rather melancholy.

“Truly I tell you,” he said to his disciples, “there will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.”

To say that his disciples were stunned would be an understatement. It would have been like telling a New Yorker before 9-11-2001 that the city skyline would be forever changed with the fall of the Twin Towers.

“When is this going to happen?” they asked.

Jesus replied that no one knows the day or the hour, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the hour will come and it will come unexpectedly just like the flood waters came in the days of Noah.

He then went on to tell them three inter-related parables about the Kingdom of God—or “heaven”, as Matthew is fond of saying.

The first parable was of ten bridesmaids who took their lamps and waited for the bridegroom. Five were wise, he said, and five were foolish. The difference between the wise and the foolish was that the wise were in it for the long haul. They knew that a bridegroom could be unpredictable, so they carried extra oil for their lamps. The foolish did not. “Watch,” Jesus commanded, “for you know neither the day nor the hour.” The simple point of the parable is that you should always be ready for the Kingdom of God to enter into our lives and to remember that it may well come when you least expect it.

The second parable builds upon the first. It is one that was read just a few minutes ago. It is the parable of talents. Speaking of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, Jesus continued. “For it will be like when a man goes on a journey and calls for three of his servants. During his absence he entrusts to the servants the affairs of this estate. In the parlance of the time he gave to one servant 5 talents, to another 2 talents and to a third 1 talent—each, we are told, according to their ability. Then he left, to return, but they did not know when. The first servant, the one that had been given 5 talents immediately went out and used the talents to create five more talents. The second servant did likewise; he used his two talents to make two additional talents. The third servant, though, was afraid. He was afraid that he would lose the talent that he had been given, so he buried it.

Eventually the day arrived when the master returned. He asked for an accounting of the talents that had been left in the care of the servants. The first servant approached the master and said, “Master, you gave me five talents. I have used those talents to create five more.” “Well done, good and faithful servant” the master replied. “You have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.”

The second servant approached the master and said, “Master, you gave me two talents. I have used those talents to create two more.” “Well done, good and faithful servant” the master replied. “You have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.”

The third servant came before the master and said, “Master, ...I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here

it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.” (*The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, Eugene Peterson, c. 2002)

“That’s a terrible way to live” the master replied. “It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew that I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

“Take the talent and give it to the one who risked the most. Get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.” (*The Message*)

In other words, use your resources in the manner in which the Master intended for you to use them.

I don’t know who you identify with in that parable but more often than I like to admit, I identify with the third servant. I am easily frightened and cautious by nature. But then I think of something that Theodore Roosevelt once said,

“Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure... than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much, because they live in a gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat.”

The third parable builds upon the first two. It is the parable of the sheep and the goats. When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the people and he shall separate them one from another, some to the right, others to the left, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. And what will distinguish the two? It will be, like it was for the wise and foolish bridesmaids, and for the servants of the master; it will be the decisions that they made.

To those on his right the Son will say, “Enter you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,

I was thirsty and you gave me drink,

I was homeless and you gave me a room,

I was naked and you gave me clothes,

I was sick and you stopped to visit,

I was in prison and you came to me.”

And those on his right will say, “What are you talking about?”...and the Son will reply, I’m telling you a solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was *me—you did it to me!*”

And to those on the left he will say, “Get away from me. Why? Because—
I was hungry and you gave me no meal,

I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,

I was homeless and you gave me no bed,

I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,

Sick and in prison, and you never visited me.”

“What are you talking about?” they will ask. And he will reply, “Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, *that was me—you failed to do it to me!*”

A little over three years ago the Mission Committee designated the annual Pentecost offering to go to a young woman who was going to Africa as a part of a program called “Young Adult Volunteers in Mission.” She was to be placed in a girl’s school in Mombasa, Kenya, the country’s second largest city. Once there she was primarily assigned to work in a day program for the street boys of Mombasa. Government records say that there are 30,000 abandoned children in that city alone but Non-Government Organizations put that number considerably higher.

Several people in our congregation followed her activity through her “blog”—which is a contraction for a “web-site log” or on-line diary.

When she returned to the States she was invited to preach at a worship service. Her message pulled back a curtain that many of us knew existed but preferred to ignore, or at least not think about. In her message she talked about the boys who were thankful for a meal and a place to stay during the day, even if at the end of the day they had to go back out on the streets and fight for a discarded cardboard box for a bed.

She also spoke about one little fellow that asked her a really hard question.

“One day this little boy came up and asked, “Are you a Christian?” I was a little shocked at first, not because of the question but because most of the people in Kenya ask if you are saved. But, I responded to him saying, “Yes, are you?” His response was, “Well I was for two weeks, then I quit.”

I held myself back from laughing because how can you quit? It is not like an addiction. I explained to him that no matter what, if he goes to church or not, God is always with him. Then he asked me the hardest question of all.

“Then why does he make me hurt, why does he hate street boys, why is he not there for me like he is always there for you? If white people are Christian and are supposed to love and help everyone, then why do the white people walk by me everyday on the streets?”

**Wow! That was a hard question, which took me awhile to respond.”
How would you respond to that question?**

A few weeks later the Missions Committee had their monthly meeting. Toward the end of the meeting a member of the committee said that she had something to say. She told how she was moved by what she had read on the blog and heard in the sermon.

“I think that we have an opportunity to make a difference,” she said. “I think that we should do something.” In response, as Congregationalists and Presbyterians are for doing, a task force was formed.

Over a two and half year period the task force met before worship on the first Sunday of the month in the Brides’ Lounge. During their time together they studied our resources which included First Federated Church’s rich history in international missions as is represented by the flags that hang in the back of our sanctuary, spoke with people who are involved in international business, interviewed a former ambassador to Kenya, and reconnected with a former member of this congregation who is now in the Peace Corps in east Africa.

Through this process they realized that we could not do a program alone but that **we could** be a part of a bigger program so they set out to find a “reliable” mission partner; one in which we could make a real difference.

Many times the task force had the experience of one door closing and another opening.

One night as Sue and I were driving home I was sitting at the corner of War Memorial Drive and University waiting for the light to change so that I could turn north. I remember saying to Sue, “The most frustrating thing that I have found about this whole project is that nobody wants to go to Mombasa. And who can blame them? It’s hot and humid and malaria ridden. It is *hell*.”

There was a moment of silence before Sue responded. “What better place for the church to be than ‘hell?’”

And the words of that old creed that has inspired and carried the large “C” Church came to my mind. “He descended into hell and arose again on the third and ascended into heaven to sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty...”

A few weeks later, through Providence, or chance, Grace or luck or coincidence, call it what you will, we were referred to an organization called Cornerstone Development headquartered in Kampala, Uganda.

Their name, “Cornerstone,” comes from the 118th Psalm and applied to Jesus by the writer of I Peter;

“The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.”

Later, in talking to Cornerstone’s co-founder and director Tim Kruetter, Fred Hoy, John Nixon and I were told that they chose that name because their ministry is to the “rejected” children of Africa who will be the cornerstones of Africa’s future.

In the spirit of due diligence I reluctantly agreed to go to Africa. I say reluctantly because anyone who knows me well knows that I am afraid to fly. I also heard echoes of my father’s voice, who on more than one occasion, noted that “ministers don’t live in the real world.” If I was to go, there had to be people accompany me who had “street cred” with the congregation.

John Nixon, who has traveled extensively throughout Africa readily agreed to go with me. As a side note: He recently traveled to South Africa to be a part of the centennial celebration of the McCord Hospital, which was founded by his missionary grandfather.

One Sunday morning I passed Fred Hoy in the hall and on a whim—or Providence, take your pick—I asked him if he wanted to go to Africa with me. “Sure” he replied without the least bit hesitation. I thought then and still wonder now, if maybe his wife wanted to kill me on the spot!

Within a matter of weeks, we were off. Once again Grace, I like to think provided benefactors—both known and unknown—who covered my travel expenses and accommodations.

Our first stop was to the Cornerstone Development home office in Kampala, Uganda. While there we were shown their Leadership Academies—which are considered by many to be the finest in all of Africa, their Youth Corps group homes and their development centers. We also learned that over the past twenty years their programs have expanded into the Sudan, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi. They hoped to go into Kenya but were waiting for a door to open. We witnessed first hand that they take seriously their mission statement of “Developing the Cornerstones of Africa’s Next Generation.”

Then we traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to look at another program in order to compare approaches. Our final destination was Mombasa, Kenya. Accompanied by two representatives of Cornerstone we explored the city streets and current resources. Everywhere we went we were told the same thing; the need is great and God’s love revealed in the person, principles and teachings of Jesus can go a long way in healing the divides that increasingly threaten our world.

We visited and talked to the children who live on the streets. Each has their own story. I had prepared myself emotionally for what I was going to see so I cannot say that I was shocked but I was greatly saddened. If you want a small visual of what we saw, you need to watch the movie “Slumdog Millionaire” for, though set in India, it captures the desperation of the 30,000 street children of Mombasa.

The children are called in Kswahili, “chokora” which means “lives that have no meaning.” They are also called “garbage people.” Their lives are brutal. Mombasa is a major center for child prostitution. The street children are beaten, raped and often hungry. To ease their pain and to forget what happens to them, many gather in a section of the city called “boxini.” The kids huff or inhale a mixture of glue and gasoline out of discarded plastic water bottles.

While no doubt some of the children have become incorrigibly hardened by life on the streets, every street child we met welcomed us with a bright smile, a warm greeting, and a yearning heart for someone to love them.

As our time in Mombasa drew to an end we sat down with our two companions from Cornerstone for a real heart to heart talk. Come to find out, not only were we looking them over, but they were looking us over. Our biggest concern was Cornerstone’s reliability and track record. Their biggest concern was our theology! We agreed that if we could work things out on our end, they would implement a pilot program in Mombasa.

This morning the Mission Committee is inviting the members and friends of First Federated Church to “jump start” their annual World Communion Sunday special offering designated to international mission. They designated Cornerstone Development as this year’s recipient. The offering will be used by them to start a pilot program to take street boys off of the streets and set them on course to productive lives by living in a community where the principles, practices and person of Jesus are lived out.

Over the next few weeks members of the Mission Committee will be available to give you an information sheet regarding “seed” money—that has largely been donated to the committee—for use in this special offering. The committee is seeking individuals or

groups who are willing to take a “talent”—in this case, a hundred dollars—and use it to grow more money for this project.

The Mission Committee knows we are a big church with a wide variety of gifts, talents, and interests.

The Apostle Paul said it best when he wrote that there are a variety of gifts, a variety of talents, but it is the same Lord who is served.

We, as a congregation and as individuals are a part of something called the Body of Christ. We respond to various opportunities differently. In the field of mission some are moved by the work of the culinary school of South Side Mission,

others by the work of Friendship House,

or the reading program at Common Place,

or with our work with Thomas Jefferson Elementary School,

or Habitat for Humanity,

or the Center for Prevention of Abuse

or any of our other local programs supported in this past year’s Christmas catalog.

The Mission Committee also knows that many will be moved to support this special opportunity to partner with Cornerstone Development as it changes the lives of children who have no where else to turn.

Earlier this morning, at 6 o’clock, we sent a team of adults and youth on a mission trip to Bay City, Michigan.

In a few minutes we will “commission” one of our own to a volunteer ministry. Roger Dornaus discovered a way to use his “gifts,” his “talents” when he worked with the families displaced by last year’s floods along the Mississippi River. Through his experience he stepped forward to become a part of the National Response Team of the Presbyterian Church (USA). As a member of this response team Roger will be deployed to areas of disaster within the United States for a period of up to two weeks. He will also receive an additional week of training annually.

A little later this morning a member of our Mission Committee will talk to you about this talent program.

The important thing is not whether you participate in this special opportunity.

No, as our lessons clearly indicate, the more important thing is that we are diligent in making good use of the talents with which we have been blessed,

that we recognize the face of Jesus in the faces of the least,
the forgotten and the dismissed

and that we are alert for the in-breaking of the
Kingdom of God into our lives.