

Sunday, November 19, 2023 – Morning Message:

Will you pray with me? Generous and always-giving God, thank you for your amazing grace and abundant love as we recognize it especially in the good news about death. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable and even pleasing in your sight, we pray to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Here we are...mere days before Thanksgiving. As the holidays are rapidly approaching, it is inevitable that the shopping calendar begins to loom large. When we were children, we relished that oh-so-slow countdown of shopping days left until Christmas, didn't we? But now, as adults, that same countdown can feel ominous – a little or a lot – as we are constantly reminded of how little time we have left to complete our necessary and desired purchases – gifts, food, etc. I saw something on Facebook the other day that made me chuckle: “There are two modes of Christmas shopping – I have lots of time left... and then, Oh No!” Knowing that we only have a certain amount of time brings a sense of urgency to what otherwise would be fairly normal days.

This Christmas shopping days countdown has inspired me to wonder what it would be like to know how many days each of us has left to walk this earth. The most recent statistics tell us that the average life span for a person in the US is a little over 79 years; 77 for men, and 81 for women. Simple math tells us that, on average, we have 28,855 days to spend being alive, to “spend” however we choose. There's even a website that will let you put in two dates and it will give you the number of days between them so that you can see how much of your average lifespan you have left. It's all rather sobering, isn't it?

So where am I going with all this, and what does it have to do with “The Good News About Death,” which is the topic on which we are focusing on these Sundays in November?? Well, simply put, “the good news about death” is that the number of days any one of us has left on this earth is but a small part of God's larger, far more epic story for each of us and all of us together. Our two Scripture passages today also contain words of wisdom that help us navigate our days and live into God's promise in Christ of life eternal in their presence.

In Psalm 90:1-12, the psalm-writer gives thanks for the past and the present. The Lord has been our help from generation to generation, and throughout it all, God is God. Although the verses we heard from Psalm 90 describe our short lives as hard work and trouble, later verses speak of God renewing the soul so that each day we rejoice and celebrate. There are reasons to give thanks each day, and perhaps that is the single thing for which we might be most thankful when we gather

around our Thanksgiving tables on Thursday. Perhaps that is the psalm-writer's truest intent. If we recognize each day the brevity of the full number of our days, we would treat every day as a precious gift from God. Days could be lived fully, joyfully serving God rather than lived in dread and a paralysis brought on by worry and fear. The last verse from Psalm 90 that we heard, "teach us to number our days so that we can have a wise heart," suggests that if we truly measured our life, we would live these days differently. The psalm-writer similarly suggests that God looks back on a thousand years much like we humans think back on yesterday. We are more than our relatively short earthly lives when we connect to an eternal God.

Our Gospel passage for today, the "Parable of the Talents" from Matthew 25, also imparts wisdom – Jesus's wisdom – as to how we are to live well the numbered days of our earthly lives. The stories that Jesus told were not easy to hear – certainly not then, and not now either. And they are not easy to preach – take it from me! And it seems to me, that the closer Jesus got to the end of his earthly days, the harder his stories were to hear. Jesus told stories that were designed to upset the status quo of the empire and the religious structures and authorities of his time. They were and are the heart of Jesus's teaching and preaching, as they are recounted to us in the Gospels. In Matthew's Gospel, this "Parable of the Talents" dislodges our sense of balance, our assumptions about matters such as the shrewd investment of church endowments to who really owns the lives we are living. Mary Oliver, a favorite poet of mine, asks this question about this parable: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Jesus has left us no explanation of this parable, might as we wish he would have! There is no follow-up, private dialog with his disciples in which he tells them for whom he means it, and what it really means for his intended audience. There are multiple interpretations. There's this one: it's about focusing on the importance of investing our talents, that we might reap far more than we sow. And then, there's this one: the master in the parable is a tyrant, who is simply out for all he can get his hands on, and so the one-talent guy reaps the full wrath of the master. And then there's this one: "The rich get richer and the poor get poorer." And then there's this one – the shortest and most to-the-point: "Use it or lose it." I kind-of like that one, even if it is a vast over-simplification of this parable with so many nuances.

For example – did you know that our English word "talent," referring to special abilities people have, is derived from the Greek word referring to the amount of wealth the master entrusts to his workers? And that it came into the English language as a result of this parable? A talent was, in

Jesus's day, a measure of weight which came to denote a fixed amount of silver or gold, roughly equivalent to \$1000. In first century Palestine, \$1000 was the wage of an ordinary worker...for fifteen years of work! Adjusted for inflation, we're talking about, in today's dollars, a quarter of a million dollars!

So let's focus on interpreting this parable as Jesus's wisdom about investing our talents. The point of the story becomes the importance of growing the talents or gifts the master entrusts to us. Our response may well involve risk, but fruitfulness is the goal. In this interpretation, the one-talent worker demonstrates a failure of faith as well as a failure of fruit-bearing. He is foolish and the others are wise. We focus accountability on the one who buries – squanders, so to speak – what he was to have invested and used, and thus multiplied. Jesus regularly rebuked the wealthy and especially the religiously privileged chief priests and elders for this. Fear, but more significantly, self-righteous self-interest can lead one to bury one's gifts. If one opts out by taking the one talent and burying it, if one lives in fear and self-protection, one loses big-time. This loss is deemed by Jesus to be far greater than the potential failure of risking the talent. Burying the talent is what one does when one is focused on the worry and fear to be found in counting the number of days one has left. Multiplying the talent is what one focuses on when one is embracing "The Good News About Death."

In the movie, *Big Fish*, the character named Edward and his friends dare one another to visit the swamp witch. They have heard that to look into her glass eye is to see your own eventual death. Unlike the others who are fearful, Edward argues that knowing your end helps you live. He says, "If dying was all you thought about, it could kind of screw you up. But it could kind of help you, couldn't it? Because you'd know that everything else you can survive." "The Good News About Death" is that God promises us that the worst thing is never the last thing.

When we remember that our God-given place in this universe is not a status we've earned, but a gift graciously given, we will better recognize the sacred weight of every second, the rich talents to be found in every hour of every day. The writer of Psalm 90 evokes the sense of human mortality as we see how brief and fragile our lives can be, and ends with a heartfelt prayer: "Teach us to number our days so we can have a wise heart." The Parable of the Talents reminds us that we will lose our lives if we do not give them, if we bury them, if we forget who is the giver of all life. Both the psalm and the parable of Jesus rest on the reality of the One who was, and is, and will be forever. "The Good News About Death." Amen.