

“A Blessed Congregation”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, November 15, 2020  
Anniversary Sunday

Matthew 25:14-20

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams identifies what he calls the ‘currency’ of a community, the words and the language that you will hear spoken within and amongst the people who gather into a recognized form of community. For example, a Benedictine monastery will have a currency that reflects their Rule of Order, with words like: obedience, equality, holiness. As Rowan Williams explains, “All communities need a medium of exchange, a language that assures their members that they are engaged in the same enterprise. It involves common stories and practices, things that you can expect your neighbour to understand without explanation, ways and styles of doing and saying things.”<sup>1</sup>

Language as a ‘currency’ is also a distinguishing factor of larger communities, like cities and provinces, even countries. The currency for a region like the Maritime provinces of Canada would include words like warm, welcoming, and down-to-earth. This region is known for its heroic responses to terrible tragedies. I am thinking of the 1998 Swissair Flight 111 that crashed into the ocean, 5 miles from Peggy’s Cove, Nova Scotia. I am thinking of Gander, Newfoundland which became a home for hundreds of airplanes that had to find an airport in which to land when the terrorist 9-11 attack shut down all global air traffic. This community wore their heart on their sleeve, welcoming thousands into their community, with shelter and food and a shoulder to cry on. The Broadway musical *Come from Away* has captured the currency of this community in its music and story.

A currency can shift though. It can be replaced. Look at how the American currency of democracy has changed by the introduction of an alternate currency courtesy of Donald Trump. Even before he was elected into the office of President, his currency was taking hold. Words like fake news, fake media, liars, fraud, cheating, stealing, rigged election, corruption, ‘lock her up’ are all established speaking points of his administration.

While Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him and asked him, “Tell us ... what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3) Jesus answers them with a series of parables to help them to understand what will happen at the ‘end of the age’. Matthew 25:14-20, the Parable of the Talents, is one of them.

The parable is about a man who is about to go on a journey. He calls three of his servants to him and ‘according to their ability,’ he gives them varying amounts of money, called talents. “In Jesus’ day, a talent was a unit of money approximating fifteen years of earnings by a day laborer.”<sup>2</sup> It was an enormous amount of money that he entrusted to his servants. Upon his return, the man calls the three servants to him to ‘settle accounts’ with them. The one given 5 talents has doubled the investment to 10 talents. Likewise, the one given 2 talents has doubled

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Way of St. Benedict*, (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Feasting on the Word, Homiletical Perspective, 311.

the investment to 4 talents. And the man is so pleased with their work. The third servant, fearing what he calls the reputation of his boss to be deceitful and lawless, has buried the money in the ground so that none of its value would be lost. When the man hears that the servant did nothing with the money, he is sent away, into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

When I read this parable, my anxiety rises because I identify with the one talent servant. I go to an immediate self-assessment which typically ends up with I haven't done enough. I'm as bad as this guy. I've buried my talent in the ground and I have done nothing with it. A commentary expresses it well for me, "We know what faithful living looks like, but we hesitate to live it ... Why? Perhaps some of us feel our talent is too small to truly make a difference."<sup>3</sup>

Let's look at the 'currency' of our parable. Here are the words I've underlined from various translations of this text: thrown out, loser, pathetic, not enough, harsh, fear, lazy, worthless, outer darkness, gnashing of teeth, cast out. It is a currency of fear and darkness. This parable is one of several that describe what Jesus will be looking for when he returns in triumph at the end of time, often called the Second Coming.

The Second Coming will be a time of judgement – when the wheat will be separated from the chaff, when the sheep will be separated from the goats, when we will be judged for what we did with what we were given. What does the United Church of Canada say about the Second Coming? From the Twenty Articles of Faith in the Basis of Union, written in 1908 and adopted in 1925, we read: "Article XIX. Of the Resurrection, the Last Judgement, and the Future Life: We believe that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and of the unjust, through the power of the Son of God, who shall come to judge the living and the dead: that *the finally impenitent shall go away into eternal punishment* and the righteous into life eternal."<sup>4</sup> The finally impenitent shall go into eternal punishment - there is the outer darkness and the gnashing of teeth!

Eschatology is the study of these 'last things.' Canadian theologian, Dr. Catherine MacLean, writes, "The doctrine of last things matters to us for two reasons: our journeys come to an end, and how we have spent that time matters."<sup>5</sup> She sees it very much as a hopeful 'currency' in our faith language, and not one of fear and condemnation. She writes, "many of us have resolved to align with hope. We stake our faith on future hope, not future devastation. We conclude that God's love is primary and unconditional."<sup>6</sup>

Rowan Williams suggests that "a church will 'set the currency of goodness and kindness circulating through [its] community'."<sup>7</sup> The currency of a church includes the language of love, forgiveness, mercy, *and* hope, a currency that continues to offer hope even in a moment as decisive as the judgement scene of the second coming.

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<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 4, Homiletical Perspective*, 311.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Faith MacLean and John H. Young, *Preaching the Big Questions: Doctrine Isn't Dusty* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2015), 247.

<sup>5</sup> MacLean, *Preaching the Big Questions*, 245.

<sup>6</sup> MacLean, *Preaching the Big Questions*, 247.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *The Way of St. Benedict*, 17.

In moments when I realize that I have effectively buried my one talent in the ground out of fear of my limitations, in my worry that I am not enough, I remember that the currency of God's love is more than my fear. The currency of God's forgiveness is more than my failing. The currency of God's grace is more than my shame.

And today we recognize the currency of this church, found in its prayers, in its ministries, in its fellowship, found in each other, a currency handed down to us by generations of the faithful who have called this sanctuary their spiritual home, a currency of hope, caring, love, and faith.

To God be the glory.

Amen.