The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Marcia O'Grady, Moderator
Glen Ridge Congregational Church

A.Talented.People



Sunday, November 15, 2026
Matthew 25:14 - 30

Pastor John:

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

I didn't plan this. We are in the midst of stewardship season - a season in which we think about and pray how we would like to support the church in the upcoming year. I didn't plan that this was going to be the reading. This is such a stewardship season reading. It just happened. The lectionary did it.

Now, when we come to this moment in our worship, somebody like me gets up into a place like this and starts saying things to you. And over time, you can think that there's something special about me and my words. That I have some kind of inner, I don't know, inner vision of God that is better, more profound, deeper than maybe others might have. I'm here to tell you, as you think about me being installed, that I don't believe that is true.

We have a saying here in the UCC, which we got from a poet, and it says that God is still speaking. That means that God, and what God has to say to us, is still evolving; still being shared with us. I would add to this statement that God is still speaking and that God is still speaking through all of us. Not just somebody like me, not just somebody standing in a pulpit, not just on a Sunday morning, but that all of you are also wrapped up in this vision.

You too have something to say and offer and God is still speaking, and God is still speaking through you too.

Every month, the council gathers, and as we open these meetings, someone offers a prayer or a devotion, a reflection; something to set our minds and hearts right in the work and the agreements that we will explore together. At our last meeting, Marcia O'Grady, who is the Moderator of our church, offered a reading of something she had written for what had, at that time, been a paper newsletter. I was so struck by her words that I asked Marcia to come and share those words with all of you today because I can't say it better than she wrote it and I really feel that God is speaking through what she wrote. So, Marcia, would you share your words with us?

Marcia O'Grady:

I will. Thank you. So, just a little background: I was chair of Stewardship from 2005 to 2008. In 2008, our theme was "A Generous God, A Generous People". In September of that year, as you've just heard, I introduced this theme in our *not* e-newsletter. This is the one from September 15th, 2008. Do not ask me why I have this. Perhaps I was inspired by Bart Brown. But in any case, in case you were wondering what was going on the Sunday of that week, Cindy Reynolds was preaching and David Stinson was presiding. Victoria Mitchell was the acolyte. Beth and Jim Downey delivered flowers, and my husband Jim O'Grady was the head usher, assisted, as we used to say, by Sharon Harms and David Ellertson, among others.

So, now flash forward to 2026. I read this as part of our Council meeting. So here it goes. This is what I said then and now and again:

Every book I read on stewardship recommends the Parable of the Talents, which we've just heard, as a great text for study. Most of us are familiar with the story and I'll get to this point in a little bit. Hearing the entire story is very, very powerful. But as you heard, a master goes off on a long trip. Before he leaves, he entrusts these three servants with a sum of money. One servant gets five coins, talents in the parable. The second servant gets two, and the third servant gets one. Jesus tells us that each servant was given according to his ability. Three different servants, three different abilities, and three different amounts of money entrusted to them. When the master returns, he finds that the first two servants have made a profit, and he lavishes them with praise. Enter into the joy of your master, he tells these two. The third servant, the one given one coin, made no such profit. He was a cautious and fearful fellow, so instead of investing the money, he buried the coin in a hole. He told his master: "I was afraid and went out and buried your coin in a hole."

See, here is what belongs to you. I picture this timid but trustworthy fellow eagerly turning the coin over to his master. He stands there, the coin in hand, this hole at his feet, anxious about what the master is going to say. While instead of saying thank you, the master let the

servant have it, calling him wicked and lazy. The master then takes that coin and gives it to one of the now favored servants and kicks the third servant out of his house.

I've always thought the master was a bit of a jerk to tell you the truth. Couldn't he have offered some kind of encouragement? Couldn't he have said, don't be afraid. Don't invest the money. You didn't invest the money wisely, but you didn't lose it all either. In fact, I have more money than when I left, so it's okay. But that, alas, is not what the master says. Now I realize we don't have to agree with every passage of the Bible, but we don't get to ignore them either.

Peter Gomes' sermon in his book, *Sermons Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, gave me a new perspective on this parable that I did not really like very much. He writes that the story isn't about money and investments. It is a story about engagement. It is a story about how we apply our gifts of ability, time, and money to further God's mission in the world. Gomes says of the parable, this is not an example of taking food from the mouths who have not to fill the stomachs of those who have. It is rather to say that those who dream no dreams shall have no vision.

This poverty is not a virtue. It is the worst kind of impoverishment, the lack and fear of imagination. So you see, the third servant did the minimum he could with his gift, and that clearly wasn't enough. Let me be clear. I do not think Glen Ridge Congregational Church is the third servant. “A Generous God, A Generous People” was the theme for that year's fall campaign because we are a generous and imaginative church. But here's the thing. I don't think we are as generous as God calls us to be.

Do we think of stewardship as a response to God's love or as an obligation? Of course we have an obligation to pledge. Jesus was clear about that. But if we give primarily out of obligation, we fail to sense the joy and the liberation, the oneness with our God that comes from giving out of thankfulness and as a response to God's love and generosity. I know each of us has dreams and aspirations for our church and each of us knows we have great gifts to share. So, what is holding us back?

This is the question I would like you to prayerfully consider this season. Like the servants, each of us has different gifts, talents, and capabilities. God entrusts us with these gifts and leaves us free to act or not act in God's name. So, pray and imagine. Imagine with me a church whose response to God's extravagant love and generosity is extravagant love and generosity. A church of where gifts of time, talent, and treasure are freely and liberally given because its members know that they will be enriched in every way by their great generosity. Let that church be our church. Thank you.

Pastor John:

Thank you, Marsha. God has given me a dream, and I know God has given each one of you a dream. And there are definitely days when I don't think I have enough courage and strength

for the dream that God has given me for my own life, and for the dream that I see for this church. God doesn't say just come this one step. God says, look at the horizon. I'm going to take you beyond that. Stewardship season is about having courage, to acknowledge the dream that God has given us, and to ask for the courage and the strength to live into that dream. What has God put into your heart? Where do you see the horizon? And what do you fear that holds you back from saying for this church, we're not just going to the horizon, we're going to the ends of the world because that is God's dream for us.

Amen.