

**First Reading** (Rev. Julia Older)

**Holy Kitchen**

Christmas begins officially the day after Thanksgiving. You know what I mean. Decorations are being put up in my neighborhood and we are everywhere exhorted to be jolly and bright.

However, in quiet moments, the present season brings bittersweet memories of years past.

I myself almost always have a few days, usually early in December, when I feel especially pensive if not vulnerable and alone.

Nothing stays the same. Even the people in my life are in a long line coming into view and receding into memory. Only a few travel with me for most of way and they, like myself, keep changing. Life is change and often that is good, but some days it is just too tender with memory.

Often for me the most vivid recollections come as I am preparing for yet another celebration and I am particularly and acutely aware of those I will not be with.

Here is a poem by Mary Wellemeyer called “Holy Kitchen”

Don't ask me why I am alone today.  
This day when almost everyone else  
Makes an enormous effort to be with family.  
It is my choice, for many reasons,  
And all is well.

Here I stand in my own familiar kitchen,  
Preparing, without any real need to do so,  
The ceremonial dishes of my tribe.

My sense of the presence of those departed is sharper  
In my solitude.

I know they come whenever I use this bowl,  
 Prepare this recipe,  
 Wait just this long and then do that.  
 Today there is no chatter to distract me,  
 No live guests eager for the result  
 Of this process.

I am more attentive to the spirit,  
 Lingering in the comfort of the ritual,  
 My thoughts and gestures start a conversation  
 With the hovering shades.  
 They speak in silence- and I listen-  
 And when they are silent again,  
 Their lingering blessings remain,  
 Settling gently in this place,  
 Leaving it forever changed,  
 Ever so gently charged with holiness.

## **Second Reading**

### **“Fear of Rest”**

(shortened version)

Wayne Muller

My friend Marilyn is a devoted massage therapist. She is very kind and works very hard. She serves in the poorest sections of San Francisco, offering her services for free to those most in need. In seedy residential hotels, where there are people dying of AIDS or suffering with tuberculosis, she goes from the room of one sick person to another, massaging, rubbing the salve of good care into their isolated dying bodies.

When Marilyn and I talk on the phone, she often sounds exhausted. I invite her to spend a day on the beach. She says she can't. She has too much work, too many people to meet, too many things to do. She is almost weeping, such is her need to rest, but she has no inner permission to stop working, even for an afternoon.

Marilyn cares for others with great conviction. But she does not care for herself with the same conviction. She feels her time at rest will somehow take away from those in need, those whom she truly loves and hopes to serve. She assures me she is all right, and in many ways I know that she is. But if she does not rest, how soon will she burn out, and who will care for those who need her then?

Juanita is a Native American woman who leads people on vision quest-journeys into the wilderness, where they live for three days, alone, listening for the teachings that arise when one embarks on a sacred pilgrimage. What people are most afraid of, she tells me, is not so much the dangers that lurk in the wilderness, the wild animals, the darkness and cold. Most are far more anxious about having to confront whatever will come up in the empty space, when they are quiet and alone. Who knows what terror lurks in the anonymous solitude? What voices will arise in the silence? At the very same time, she says, people are afraid of what will not come up. What if I have no vision at all? What if there is nothing of value in my heart and soul, no strength, no voice of guidance, no wisdom at all—just an empty, hollow echo?

We are terrified of the painful grief that is hot to touch, sharp and piercing, so we keep moving, faster and faster, so we will not feel how sad we are, how much we have lost in this life: strength, youthful playfulness, so many friends and lovers, dreams that did not come true, all that have passed away. When we stop even for a moment, we can feel the burning, empty hole in our belly. So we keep moving, afraid the empty fire of loss will consume us.

**Sermon****The Talents**

Rev. Julia Older

First a little context –

Members of the Jesus Seminar, a group of scholars who read “Archeology Today” and study history as well as the preserved writings we know as the New Testament, teach that “Parables” are more like bumper stickers than they are like “teaching stories to be dissected.” To understand them it is important to imagine the socioeconomic and political times in which they were written. In other words, it is all but impossible to be sure what they mean, but for nearly 2000 years we have made our best guesses.

“The Talents” is a parable taken from the Gospel of Matthew. Today the Jesus Seminar scholars agree that Matthew the apostle did not write this Gospel. More likely it was written by an anonymous Christian writing towards the end of the first century, partly because it was originally composed in Greek rather than translated from Aramaic or Hebrew. Of the four gospels we now have, Matthew is the most closely aligned with first-century Judaism repeatedly stressing how Jesus fulfilled Jewish prophecies.

**Parable of “The Talents”**

This parable tells of a master who was leaving his home to travel, and before going gives three servants three different amounts of money. On returning from his travels, the master asks each servant for an account of their money and what they did with it.

The first servant (or slave) reports that he was given five talents and he has made five talents more. A talent, by the way, is a very large amount of money, perhaps equivalent to 6,000 denarii (that helps a lot) – or, the earnings of a day laborer for about 20 years.

The master praises the servant as being good and faithful. “Well done, my good and faithful servant!” He gives him more responsibility because of his faithfulness, and invites the servant to be “joyful together with him.”

The second servant says that he had received two talents, and he has made two talents more. The master praises this servant in the same way, as being good and faithful, gives him more responsibility, and invites the servant to be joyful together with him.

The last servant who had received one talent reports that, knowing his master is a hard man, had buried his talent in the ground for safekeeping, and therefore returns the original amount to his master.

The master calls him wicked and lazy, saying that he should have at least placed the money in the bank to generate interest. The master then orders the third servant to be thrown outside into the darkness where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The master commands that the one talent be taken away from that servant, and given to the servant with ten talents, because “everyone that has much will be given more, and whoever that has a little, even the little that he has will be taken away.”

(Matthew 25.29). “For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

The Gospel of Luke has a similar teaching.

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Could the parable of the Talents be more confusing? It throws our ideas about justice out the window. It even seems to contradict another parable about the day laborers in the vineyard, also in the Gospel of Matthew, in

which the landowner pays the workers who come early in the morning and those who come late in the day exactly the same wage. Naturally, the workers who were in the fields longest are not happy. The landowner says, “Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Are you envious because I am generous? So the last will be first, and the first will be last. “ (Matthew 20.1-16)

These stories are referred to often in our culture. It is part of being literate to know them, like knowing a little Shakespeare, lets say. Those of you who were not raised in churches in which the Bible was studied now know a little bit. I wasn't raised in a tradition that studied the Bible and when I got to seminary and had to take a couple of classes I actually found it fascinating. And it seems appropriate in this Advent/ Christmas season that we learn a bit about the New Testament.

Here's one way of understanding “The Talents” parable: what if the talents, actually represent “knowledge” or “wisdom” that had been gained from the master and the first two servants grew by using their knowledge. The last servant did not have even a little wisdom and could not benefit at all. Perhaps the master had given only what he thought each servant could manage.

As I said, who knows?

Actually, I got started on this sermon while reading about Hamilton Federated Church doing an experiment from the same parable. That church decided to interpret it literally and give out actual money and see what people did with it. What happened was so interesting that the wire services picked it up all across the country.

I thought it could be an interesting experiment to do with our older kids. It also made me think of what we do here with our gifts of actual talent . . . like our musicians this morning and all the time we give here and how we care for one another. Time and talent as well as treasure are required to keep this community working.

I suspect that most of US respond, “Oh I don't have any special talent. I've never chaired a committee or served on a board” and then because we love this place, we reach up toward our potential.

So, here is a shortened version of what happened at Hamilton Federated as written by Helen O'Neil from the Associated Press.

“The Rev. Hamilton Throckmorton read from the Gospel of Matthew and like the master, entrusted each adult in his congregation with \$50. Church members had seven weeks to find ways to double their money and the proceeds to go to the church.

"Live the parable of the talents!" Throckmorton exhorted, as assistants handed out hundreds of red envelopes. The cash, Throckmorton explained, was loaned by several anonymous donors.

In her regular pew at the back of the church, where she has listened to sermons for 40 years, 73-year-old Barbara Gates gasped. What kind of kooky nonsense is this?

"Sheer madness," sniffed retired accountant Wayne Albers, 85, to his wife, Marnie, who hushed him as he whispered loudly. "Why can't the church just collect money the old-fashioned way?"

As church members spilled into the late summer sunshine that morning to ponder their skills and their souls, there were many who thought: Hamilton is really pushing us this time.

"There was definitely this tension, this pressure to live up to something," said Hal Maskiell, a 62-year-old retired Navy pilot who spent days trying to figure out how to meet the challenge.

Maskiell's passion is flying a four-seater Cessna 172 Skyhawk over the Cuyahoga County hills. He decided to use his \$50 to rent air time from Portage County airport and charge \$30 for half-hour rides. Church members eagerly signed up. Maskiell was thrilled to get hours of flying time, and he raised \$700.

His girlfriend, Kathy Marous, 55, was far less confident. What talents do I have, she thought dejectedly. She was tempted to give the money back.

And then Marous found an old family recipe for tomato soup, one she hadn't made in 19 years. She remembered how much she had enjoyed the chopping and the cooking and the canning and the smells. With Hal's encouragement, Marous dug out her pots. She bought three pecks of tomatoes. Suddenly she was chopping and cooking and canning again. At \$5 a jar, she made \$180. "I just never imagined people would pay money for the things I made," Marous exclaimed.

Others felt the same way. Barbara Gates raised \$450 crafting pendants from beads and sea glass -- pieces she had casually made for her

grandchildren over the years. Kathie Biggin created fanciful little red-nosed Rudolph pins and sold them for \$2.50.

Twelve-year-old Amanda Horner pooled her money with friends, stocked up at JoAnn's fabric store, and made dozens of colorful fleece baby blankets, which were purchased by church members and then donated to a local hospital.

And 87-year-old Bob Burrows rediscovered old carpentry skills and began selling wooden bird-feeders.

But it wasn't the money; everyone said so. It was something else, something far less tangible. For seven weeks, an almost magical sense of excitement and energy and camaraderie infused the red-brick church on Bell Street, spilling over into homes and hearts as the parable of the talents came alive.

In her sun-filled studio on Strawberry Lane, Shirley Culbertson felt it -- a joyful sense of purpose that she had rarely experienced since her husband passed two years ago. Culbertson, 81, is a gifted painter and watercolors fill her house. But she discovered another talent during this time -- knitting whimsical eight-inch stuffed dolls with button noses and floppy hats. She raised \$90.

Zooming down country roads clinging to the back of a leather-clad biker, Florence Cross felt it too. For the challenge, Barry Biggin had parked his 2006 Harley Davidson Road King outside the church, offering 12-mile rides for \$30. Cross was the first to sign up. Never mind that she is in her mid-80s, had never been on a bike, or that her husband of 60 years had to hoist her up.

"Oh, it was such a thrill!" said Cross, her face glowing at the memory.

Martine Scheuermann lived the parable in her Elm Street kitchen, transforming it into an "applesauce factory" for several weeks. The 49-year-old human resources director would rise at 6 a.m. on Sundays in order to have warm batches ready for sampling at church services.

In his origami-filled bedroom on Bradley Street, 9-year-old Paul Cantlay lived the parable too. Surrounded by sheets of colored construction paper, he crafted paper dragons and stars and sailboats. He set up an origami stand at the end of his street, charged 50 cents to \$5 depending on the piece, and raised \$68.

Talents began multiplying at such a rate that the church held a bazaar after services (like our Christmas boutique.)

Everyone seemed to be talking about the challenge: over the clatter of coffee cups at Dink's restaurant, at the Fireside bookshop on the green, sipping drinks at the Gamekeeper's Tavern. Said one, "This was just an extraordinary process of exploration and discovery and of challenging ourselves. It became bigger than any one of us or than any individual talent."

There are many, many more examples of what happened.

Here's one of my favorites:

People got to know the "hen lady" -- Gabrielle Quintin, who took to raising chickens on a whim 23 years ago when she moved into a 180-year-old house with a barn. Her "ladies," as Quintin calls her backyard flock, provide a welcome distraction from her nursing job in a cancer center. Quintin decided to put her brood to work for the church. For \$10, church members could "hire-a-hen" and get three dozen fresh eggs complete with a photograph of the "lady" who laid them.

I had a lot of fun," said Quintin, whose husband, Mike, made glass birdfeeders. "And it was just this great way of bringing everyone together and connecting."

All told, Hamilton Federated Church raised over \$40,000.

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I didn't clip this article to exhort you to give more money. I just thought it was a great story and it made me smile and I thought about the ways we encourage each other here to use the other kinds of talents we have, challenging each other to try new things, to be brave, to step up and serve committees and take on special projects, to be creative and enjoy, actually take pleasure in, all the tasks that are required to keep this community functioning, welcoming, and celebrating.

I thought the story would make more sense if I began with a short explanation of New Testament forms and scholarship and at the end, and this is near the end, it morphed one more time as I invited our kids and families to tell me what they enjoy, and might like for the holidays, that doesn't cost money at all.

One class of our kids, with teacher Lisa Conrad, put together this list of activities that DON'T involve money. Don't have much money for the holidays? Here is what this class said they actually prefer: the most often mentioned no-cost activity is hiking with the family. How nice is that? Going to the beach came in second with sandcastles and winter picnics. One girl mentioned dinners with lots of people. I was surprised. I thought mostly kids hated dinners with lots of people unless there was lots of time to play afterward. This girl evidently loves sitting at the table amid all the laughter and conversation. Walking the dog as a family was mentioned and riding bikes on Canada road when it is closed to traffic. One mentioned going to Las Vegas, but I'm afraid that costs money.

I think the common denominator is time together. More than money. More than stuff. The pleasure of being together wins out . . .with maybe just a little selective forgetting about the rush and bustle of getting ready and being sometimes overtired at the end, but it doesn't have to be perfect. Actually nothing has to be perfect. Sometimes we let the goal of perfection steal something quite wonderful from us.

Amen and blessed be.