

HILLTOPPER

United Methodist Church of Parsippany

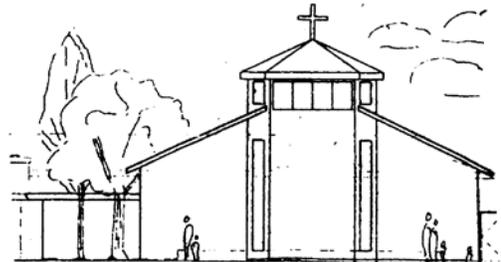
903 So. Beverwyck Road, Parsippany, NJ 07054 (973) 887-4657

http://www.parsippanyumc.com E-Mail: jeffedwards1955@gmail.com

Sunday Worship Celebration: 10:30 a.m.

In a hostile, hurting world we reach out to share kindness and laughter. Our spirituality is based on Jesus and his love and compassion. We provide a community of support and healing where all are welcomed and valued regardless of race, age, sexual orientation, disability, gender, or economic status. In a world where people feel they can love only those who are like themselves, we seek to celebrate the uniqueness of every human being.

"Making Room in the Circle"



JANUARY, 2018



A sermon preached on November 19th, 2017 based upon Matthew 25:14-30 entitled "The Question that Is Asked, and the Grace Beneath the Question."

We finish off the liturgical calendar with a series of challenging parables that Jesus told at the end of his ministry, shortly before he was nailed to a cross.

Parables can be pretty frustrating. The meaning can seem pretty obscure. Last week we had the wise and foolish maidens. This week we have the

three stewards.

We know a fair amount about the one who told the parables — that being Jesus — about what was important to him and what wasn't, so we can say with some certainty that we haven't gotten a hold of what a parable means when our initial reading seems to contradict what Jesus cared about.

Last week, although the maidens were praised as wise who didn't share their oil with the foolish maidens we can safely say the point wasn't that we shouldn't share with those in need because... *that's not Jesus.*



And this week the first read-through seems to suggest that we are to go out and devote ourselves to investing in the stock market with the hope of making as much money as we can, and that those who don't make a lot of money – well, they're wicked, lazy bums who deserve the impoverishment of their lives. But nope... *that doesn't sound like Jesus either.*

Parables invite us to climb inside and play around with them, and as I did so with this parable I found myself thinking interesting thoughts. If the story isn't about the need to go make a lot of money, then it must be symbolizing something.

The story starts off with a very large gift being given to these three servants. In those days a single "talent" was a life time's worth of wages — an enormous amount of money. Perhaps the "talents" symbolize the gift of life itself.

Now it is interesting that the amount of money given to each servant isn't the same. One servant gets five talents, another two, and the third a single talent.

Perhaps there is a recognition here of an unavoidable unfairness in terms of the life people can get born into. There are certain "givens" to any particular human life, and they fall into two categories.

Some are the givens have to do with our DNA. Some people are born with more of the traits generally considered desirable: intelligence, good looks, musical or athletic talents, and some not so much. Some people are born with naturally healthy bodies and some with sunny dispositions, while some are born with disabilities or with brain chemistry predisposed to depression and other mental illnesses.



The other part of the givenness of our lives has to do with the environments we are born into. Some people are born into a stable family with a generous capacity for love, and some families have more money than others which opens up a range of opportunities. Others are born into abusive, highly dysfunctional families and some into families that have no home at all.

So the hand we get dealt isn't fair, but only God can see the true extent of the unfairness, because some settings that can appear ideal under the surface may not be nearly as ideal as they appear, and others that seem highly unfortunate

may contain hidden blessings.

But regardless of our DNA and the environment we are born into, a question hangs over our lives. In the parable, the question isn't put into words until the end, but in every life whether spoken or unspoken the question is there and it is this: "*What are you going to do with the life you were given?*" It is the question that points to the mystery of our **free will** – that regardless of the givenness of a particular life there are always choices to be made along the way that effect how the life will play out.

The answer to the question is always a work **in process** — that is until our life comes to an end. Then the question becomes, "*What **did** you do with the life you were given?*"

There are, of course, different criteria by which the question can be answered. In the eyes of the world the answer is thought to be found in how successful a person was — how much money and power they obtained, how much attention their obituary gets.

But again, that doesn't sound like the way Jesus would assess the question.

We can assume that with Jesus, the question would have to do with what we did in the course of our lives for the sake of his kingdom here on earth. What was the impact our lives had on others? Were we an instrument of God's love and justice in this world?

The answer to this question would take into account what God alone can see — the extent of the limitations and possibilities that were the givens of our lives.



There is this Biblical principle that applies in this final accounting of our lives, and that is, *“to those to whom much has been given, much will be expected.”* With this principle in play, the people who get to hear, *“Well done good and faithful servant”* may be surprising to us.

There could be a billionaire who regularly attended church and never broke a law – who was admired by many, frequently getting his name in the paper for giving away millions to various charities, but whose giving never involved any real sacrifice and whose real concern was with being admired rather than with truly being of service to others. Such a man may hear at the end of his life, *“That’s all you did with what I gave to you? You had the opportunity to do so much more!”*

And there could be a man born into poverty to a crack-addicted mother, who never had a father, who grew up in foster care, who in his adult years spent a lot his life as an addict and a great deal of time in prison, but who in spite of the material and spiritual impoverishment of his life the man still managed on occasion to be truly kind to people, resisting the temptation to kill another human being when it would have been so easy to have done so. Such a man may hear at the end of his life, *“Well done good and faithful servant.”*

I found myself a little annoyed initially that the parable has the two guys who at the outset received the most be the ones who end up getting the master’s praise, and the guy with the least getting called *“lazy and worthless,”* because it seems to give the prosperity Gospel people the encouragement they are looking to go for as much money as possible and to blame the people who struggle in this world as lacking faith. I wanted Jesus to have one of the rich guys be the one who flunks.

But then I remember that Jesus told other stories that make that same point.

“The Rich man and Lazarus” was one – where the rich man receives judgment for ignoring the suffering of poor Lazarus. Another was the parable of the **foolish rich man** who reaches a point in his life in which his barns are stuffed full with grain. Instead of reflecting upon how blessed he is and considering how he might begin to devote himself to helping people less fortunate than himself, he chooses to press on in building **bigger barns** to contain even more grain to keep for himself.

So Jesus made *that* point elsewhere.

Maybe Jesus had it be the *one talent guy* who flunks the end-of-life test because we have this tendency, do we not, rather than comparing our lot in life to those less fortunate to compare ourselves instead with people who seem to be more fortunate: *“Look at the raw deal I got in life compared to them!”*

We tend to look at ourselves as insignificant, with limited giftedness compared to others, and quickly conclude, *“Hey, you can’t expect me to make a real difference in this world! I’m not special. I’m just trying to get by! It’s up to the really smart people, the rich people, the politicians to make this world a better place!”*

So we let ourselves off the hook.

But the Bible is full of stories of people who in the eyes of the world seemed like nobody special – the disciples themselves come to mind – who ended up offering themselves to God with the result being the world was mightily blessed by them. It wasn’t Caesar, Herod or the clergy that turned the world upside down with the Gospel – it was a bunch of nobodies from Galilee.

And churches do the same thing. We’re just a little church – what can we do?

One of the troubling things for most of us is the way the parable ends. The third servant gets called *“wicked and lazy”* and gets thrown out into the *“outer darkness to weep and gnash his teeth”*, seemingly for eternity. Talk about harsh!



But again... *that doesn't sound like Jesus. (Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew seems to have had a particular fondness for such language.)*

It is interesting how the parable simultaneously holds together *judgment* and *grace*. Because the parable finishes the way it does, the judgment is easier to identify.

But the story starts off with grace. Remember, a single talent was an enormous amount of money. The master simply gives all he has to these three servants. They didn't earn it. It was purely a gift that they were given – a treasure they were to be the stewards of for the rest of their lives.

The first two servants seem to get that. They recognize the graciousness of the master, and trusting in that graciousness, they aren't afraid to live their lives fully, to take risks, to truly enjoy their lives. They're not afraid to make mistakes, trusting that if something doesn't work out, they can get up try again, and something will have been learned in the process of making the mistake.

But the third servant doesn't experience gratitude. Although he has his needs provided for he doesn't feel blessed. He views the master as being "harsh" in spite of the fact that the master gave him this treasure – this huge amount cash outright. And then not comprehending the nature of the master, he buries the treasure, afraid to fully live his life – unwilling to take any risks lest things go badly.

So there is a direct link between the capacity to experience gratitude for our lives, and our capacity to offer ourselves to God as a part of God's ongoing blessing of this world. If we don't experience our life as a gift, we won't hear the question that God asks us in the course of our lives.

How does this happen? We get too anxious and troubled, too hurried in this world and miss the most basic thing: that we are alive, and life is a blessing! Life is an opportunity! One of the things that church provides us with is encouragement to step out of the anxious hurry of our lives, and enter into the stillness of worship – to allow the natural gratitude that is within us to rise to the surface as we return to an awareness of the basic giftedness of our lives.



We are alive. We didn't have to be alive. We didn't choose to be alive. God chose to give us life. It is a gift. Life includes a lot of very hard stuff in it, but it is far better to experience the gift of life than not to have the opportunity at all. Nobody gets to live our particular life but us.

Life is this holy adventure we are invited into where we get to experience wonder and beauty and love, and the God who gave us this gift was willing to embrace the adventure – to take the risk – of taking on human flesh and living among us. Our God is a risk taking God.

Something that fascinates me about the parable is the way the beliefs that the servants have about the nature of the master get confirmed over time. The first two servants view the master as generous and that belief leads them to experience life as full of wonderful opportunities.

The third servant views the master as harsh – a rigid law keeper just waiting to punish for any transgression, and full of fear he experiences life as being full of danger. As the story progresses, he interprets what happens as confirmation of his initial belief.

So it's not enough to belief in "God" – what matters is the kind of God we believe in. The God revealed in Jesus is one who loves us more than we know, and although this God holds us accountable, this God never gives up on us, even when we live our lives like that third servant so consumed with fear that we seem to have no room in our lives to consider being of service to others.

If you've heard me preach for a time you know that one of my favorite Jesus stories is the one where he was teaching in a house fully of people in Capernaum. Four friends bring a fifth friend who is paralyzed on a stretcher in the hope that Jesus can make their friend whole. When they find no room to enter, they refuse to give up on their intention to get their friend to Jesus, and thinking outside the box, they hoist their friend up on the roof where they tear a hole through which to lower their friend. Jesus seems not to care about the reconstruction of his house, but pleased indeed by the faith and determination of the four friends.

One of the interesting things about the story is what Jesus says right up front to the paralytic. "My son, your sins are forgiven." It seems peculiar because the friends have brought the man to Jesus for a physical healing, but Jesus seems to recognize that the root of the man's paralysis is a burden of guilt and shame that is keeping him from living his life.

He has bought into the image of God that was the dominant one abroad in those days – the ones held by the people present who grumble when they hear Jesus audaciously claim the authority to forgive sins. They believe in a harsh ledger keeper God. Believing this lie about God, the man has become the third servant in our parable, having buried the treasure of his life in the ground, afraid that he dares to truly live his life he very well might mess up yet again and add to the heavy burden of sin and guilt that weighs him down so, leaving him paralyzed.

But with his encounter with Jesus, he gets acquainted with the true God – one intent on empowering people to live their lives boldly, joyfully, lovingly. Having set the man free from the burden of his sins, he commands him to take up his stretcher and walk.

That's what we are about as the church – helping one another and this world to know the God revealed in Jesus – a God generous with grace who created us for a holy purpose – to share the grace and love that is knit into creation.

In the kindness of Jesus,
Pastor Jeff

+ + + + +



Our congregation is invited next door to **Temple Beth Am** on **Friday, January 12th at 7:30 p.m.** to share in and inter**faith service** commemorating **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

+ + + + +



We will be **taking down the Greens** in the church on **Saturday, January 13th at 10:00 a.m.** Lots of hands makes lighter work, so come on out and help!

+ + + + +

Pastor Jeff has a vision of creating **small groups** in our congregation of 6 people who would commit to meet for four weeks in a row. **He is hoping to get some groups up and running in January.** The object of the groups would be to provide an **intimate, safe setting** where persons can tell the stories of their lives -- their struggles, as well as their joys – and find mutual care and support, and to pray for one another. If this interests you, please speak to Jeff who is beginning to suggest possible groups of people.

If you aren't presently on **Facebook**, consider joining with a secret identity so you can be a member of the Parsippany United Methodist Church Congregation Group and received day by day prayer concerns and announcements and other postings regarding the life of our church.

+ + + + + +

On the second Thursday of every other month our church provides a meal for the people living temporarily at **Homeless Solutions**. If you would like to volunteer as a server, please speak to Laurie Wilken or Connie Wallace. If you would like to help cook speak Tom or Justin. **Our next opportunity to serve is Thursday, February 9th.**

+ + + + + +

CHURCH CALENDAR and SCHEDULING EVENTS

The church calendar on our website www.parsippanyumc.com has been updated. If you want to schedule an event, you need to look at the website calendar to see if the date is available. All requests for use of the church facilities need to be approved by the trustees, Connie Keller or Amy Gripp.

+ + + + + +



Interfaith Furnishings - Once every three months our church provides volunteers to assist **Interfaith Furnishings** in transporting donated furniture to people living in Morris County who would not be able to otherwise furnish their homes. **Our next Saturday to serve is on a Saturday in February.** Please speak to Bruce Letsch or Pastor Jeff if you would like to volunteer

+ + + + + +

On the **third Thursday of every month** Pastor Jeff leads a **worship service at Troy Hills Center at 10:30 a.m.** If you would like to share in this ministry to the people living in a nursing home, please join us. Speak to Pastor Jeff, Pat Winz or Andee Mihalko if you would like more information. Our next service is **Thursday, January 18th.**



Anyone aware of a **Prayer Concern** is invited to contact Doris Bradley at 973-887-3219 who will put the **Prayer Chain** into action. If Doris cannot be reached, please contact Pastor Jeff. If you would like to add your name to the people who receive the prayer chain, please speak to Betty Polen.

+ + + + + +

A day time men's discussion group with Pastor Jeff that meets on **Fridays at 1 p.m.** We discuss short readings or videos during the 90 minute sessions. Any men available in the day time are invited to join us.



To make it easier for the Congregation to keep up with their financial pledges to the Church, a **PayPal link has been added to the PUMC Homepage.** If you've never used PayPal before, it's an easy and secure way to send a payment over the Internet. You can use your bank account or a credit card to make your payment, and PayPal takes a small transaction fee. For more information or a quick demonstration on how to use this new tool, please speak with Justin Cogan

A **small gathering of men** from our church meet together **every Tuesday at 7:30 a.m. at the Empire Diner** with Pastor Jeff for breakfast, conversation, and a concluding prayer. All men are welcome.

+ + + + + +



Parsippany Emergency Food Pantry - Wes Sitgreaves has called to our attention the ongoing need of the Emergency Food Pantry in Parsippany in these difficult economic times. There are more and more families turning to the food pantry for help. You can bring your donations of non-perishable food items to the church any Sunday. Wes takes the food over as the bin gets filled up. Supermarket gift cards are also welcome - buy them from Betty Polen and raise money for the church at the same time!!! This is a very easy way to give back to the less-fortunate in our own township.

+ + + + + +



FLOWERS FOR THE ALTAR ON SPECIAL OCCASIONS – If you want to remember or honor a special occasion in your life by putting flowers on the altar, please get in touch with Connie Keller. You are certainly welcome at any time to place flowers on the altar. If you want an announcement in the bulletin, please call Connie Keller or send her an email with the dedication. Contact information: Connie's cell: 973-568-5404; home: 973-887-4384; email: connie@mhmlender.com

+ + + + + +



Consider becoming a part of one or more of our Musical Groups here at church:

Bell Choir – rehearses Thursdays at 7:00 p.m. If you are interested in joining us, please speak to Barb Bradley or Aimee Letsch - or just show up on Thursday and see what happens!

Choir – rehearses Thursdays at 7:45 p.m. We always have an "open robe" for anyone who loves to sing. We sing in 4-part harmony, so if you've sung in your high school chorus or any other equivalent, you have a great start! Speak to any choir member or Barb Bradley if you're interested.

SCRIPTURE READINGS FOR JANUARY

<u>Jan. 7</u>	<u>Jan.14</u>	<u>Jan. 21</u>	<u>Jan. 28</u>
Isaiah 60:1-6	1 Samuel 3:1-10	Jonah 3:1-5,10	Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Ephesians 3:1-12	1 Corinth 6:12-20	1 Corinth 7:29-31	1 Corinth 8:1-13
Matthew 2:1-12	John 1:43-51	Mark 1:14-20	Mark 1:21-28



JANUARY BIRTHDAYS			
3 rd	Barbara Bush	23 rd	Joseph Dente
5 th	Barbara Anderson	25 th	Jennifer Trice (Rychlicki)
11 th	Jim Sakelakos	25 th	Chris Salink
13 th	Olivia Evans	25 th	Kathryn Montecucollo
16 th	Marissa Cintineo	25 th	Mary Keller
19 th	Dominick Pesquera	27 th	Darryl Sokolowski
20 th	Jim Cochrane	29 th	Michael Weiss
22 nd	Heather Weiss	30 th	Chris Payne
		31 st	Joshua Christiango

JANUARY ANNIVERSARIES	
12 th	Fred & Grace Schlosshauer
25 th	Ruth & Charles Faulend

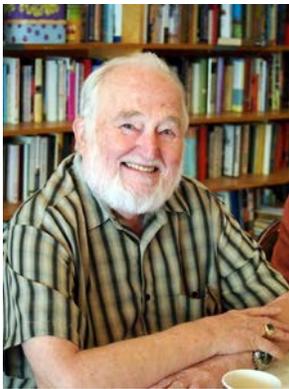


Our original Christmas Play, “**Not a One Was Lost**” was performed by a cast of thirty to a combined audience of two hundred over three nights in Christmas. To the right is the cast shortly before going on for the last performance, and above is the finale. They’re having a good time, wouldn’t you say?





And while we're at it, our choir looks like they were having a good time shortly after they finished their beautiful Christmas Cantata on December 17th. The Christmas Pageant was particularly free-formed with moments of delight like the one brought to us by Ryan Erickson.



We lost our beloved **Chick Deeks** at the end of November. The following is from Pastor Jeff's eulogy of Chick:

In the last two years Chick went through tough times physically with extended stays in the hospital and in nursing facilities. He was always determined to get better, always positive. He seemed to have an extraordinary tolerance for pain. He was always a favorite of the nursing staff; through all their poking and probing he never complained.

Every time I would visit Chick, the thing that struck me was the deep sense of gratitude he would express for all the love he had known in his life. He had a profound sense of joy. His consistent gratitude was particularly remarkable given that he didn't live an especially easy life, and there were some times in his life that were truly tough. He never really retired – he kept working right up to the point in which he simply could physically do it anymore.

Chick was remarkably generous, kind and compassionate. He was free from prejudice and welcoming of all. He nurtured and sustained friendships with people over long periods of time, and never held on to grudges. "Let bygones be bygones he would say."

January 2018

United Methodist Church of Parsippany

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday																																																																																												
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i> 7:30 AM Men's Breakfast	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i> 7:00 PM Bell Choir 7:45 PM Adult Choir	<i>5</i> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<i>6</i>																																																																																												
<i>7</i> 10:30 AM Worship	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i> 7:30 AM Men's Breakfast	<i>10</i>	<i>11</i> 7:00 PM Bell Choir 7:45 PM Adult Choir	<i>12</i> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group 7:30 PM MLK Service at Temple Beth Am	<i>13</i> 10:00 AM Taking Down Greens																																																																																												
<i>14</i> 10:30 AM Worship	<i>15</i>	<i>16</i> 7:30 AM Men's Breakfast	<i>17</i>	<i>18</i> 7:00 PM Bell Choir 7:45 PM Adult Choir	<i>19</i> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<i>20</i>																																																																																												
<i>21</i> 10:30 AM Worship	<i>22</i>	<i>23</i> 7:30 AM Men's Breakfast	<i>24</i>	<i>25</i> 7:00 PM Bell Choir 7:45 PM Adult Choir	<i>26</i> 1:00 PM Men's Discussion Group	<i>27</i>																																																																																												
<i>28</i> 10:30 AM Worship	<i>29</i>	<i>30</i> 7:30 AM Men's Breakfast	<i>31</i>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> <table border="1" style="background-color: #ffff00; border-collapse: collapse; font-size: small;"> <caption style="text-align: center;">Dec 2017</caption> <thead> <tr><th>S</th><th>M</th><th>T</th><th>W</th><th>T</th><th>F</th><th>S</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>1</td><td>2</td></tr> <tr><td>3</td><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>7</td><td>8</td><td>9</td></tr> <tr><td>10</td><td>11</td><td>12</td><td>13</td><td>14</td><td>15</td><td>16</td></tr> <tr><td>17</td><td>18</td><td>19</td><td>20</td><td>21</td><td>22</td><td>23</td></tr> <tr><td>24</td><td>25</td><td>26</td><td>27</td><td>28</td><td>29</td><td>30</td></tr> <tr><td>31</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> </tbody> </table> <table border="1" style="background-color: #ffff00; border-collapse: collapse; font-size: small;"> <caption style="text-align: center;">Feb 2018</caption> <thead> <tr><th>S</th><th>M</th><th>T</th><th>W</th><th>T</th><th>F</th><th>S</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td>1</td><td>2</td><td>3</td></tr> <tr><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>7</td><td>8</td><td>9</td><td>10</td></tr> <tr><td>11</td><td>12</td><td>13</td><td>14</td><td>15</td><td>16</td><td>17</td></tr> <tr><td>18</td><td>19</td><td>20</td><td>21</td><td>22</td><td>23</td><td>24</td></tr> <tr><td>25</td><td>26</td><td>27</td><td>28</td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> </tbody> </table> </div>			S	M	T	W	T	F	S						1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31							S	M	T	W	T	F	S						1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28			
S	M	T	W	T	F	S																																																																																												
					1	2																																																																																												
3	4	5	6	7	8	9																																																																																												
10	11	12	13	14	15	16																																																																																												
17	18	19	20	21	22	23																																																																																												
24	25	26	27	28	29	30																																																																																												
31																																																																																																		
S	M	T	W	T	F	S																																																																																												
					1	2	3																																																																																											
4	5	6	7	8	9	10																																																																																												
11	12	13	14	15	16	17																																																																																												
18	19	20	21	22	23	24																																																																																												
25	26	27	28																																																																																															