

Investing Our Lives
November 15, 2020

Rev. Karen McArthur

Texts: Zephaniah 1: 12-14a, Matthew 25: 14-30

I have to say, there is a danger when a preacher only preaches a few times a year. For fourteen years of my ministry, before I came to First Church, I preached most every Sunday. There's a rhythm to that: a week-to-week narrative, structured by the liturgical calendar and the lectionary cycles. But occasional preaching is different. Back when I just starting out, in a position similar to the positions that Jaz and Lexi and Carlyle have had here, I preached a few times a year in Beverly. After one of those early sermons, I met a few days later with my supervisor. He leaned back in his chair and said, "That was three very good sermons!"

Well, we have multiple things going on this week. It's getting close to the end of the liturgical year, with Matthew's version of the Parable of the Talents. It's Stewardship Sunday, as we explore what it means for us to financially support our church for the year ahead. The American election results are clearer and various transitions are in process. And 400 years ago, the Mayflower was on the horizon. (Historical note here: the Julian calendar in 1620 was about 10 days behind the Gregorian calendar, which we have used since 1752.) So if the Mayflower sighted land on November 9th, that will be 400 years ago this next Thursday. We haven't missed it! On top of all of this: Stewardship, Politics, and History, the threat of the pandemic looms even larger as the weather shifts from summer toward winter. That's five sermons right there!

Instead of five sermons, I find that what gets interesting is looking at the intersection of these multiple strands. And I'd like to suggest that at the intersection of these issues for us today is the question: how do we decide to invest our lives? How do we spend our time? Our money? When do we put it all on the line?

Five years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Dartmouth, Devon in England and learn about the sailing of the Mayflower from the British perspective, in anticipation of this 400th anniversary. Over the summer, as planned events shifted to virtual programming, I took a virtual tour of Leiden, in the Netherlands. I've listened in on lectures from London, Southampton, Dartmouth, and Plymouth, as well as our own Wampanoag nation. On both sides of the Atlantic, we're learning about and naming the clash of cultures in the 17th century, and the economic issues that led so many to risk their lives to cross the immense ocean in search of new life.

Many of us learned a part of the story in school. The voyage took longer than planned. The ship was crowded. There was a dangerous storm that blew them off course, further north than they had expected. We learned that they came for religious freedom, landed on Plymouth Rock, and then had a feast with the Indians, according to Edward Winslow, but that's not until 1621, so we can wait to unpack that one. They sighted land at dawn on November 9th, 400 years ago next Thursday, and then tried for two days to get around Nantucket, almost shipwrecked, were running out of beer and other provisions, and decided to come back and tuck in behind Provincetown, finding a safe harbor while they figured out what to do.

Because they were north of the 41st parallel, beyond the boundaries and the authority of the Virginia Colony, they drafted their own agreement about how they would live together, which Dave Dyer will read for us a bit later. They would govern themselves. After being cooped up together in a

very small ship since mid-summer, it's amazing that they apparently agreed on anything! But there were still five more weeks of in-between time, crowded on the anchored ship and scouting locations, before they decided on Plymouth and came ashore.

The more I learn, the more I realize that the English actually had quite a bit of information before they sailed. There were expeditions that had sailed to Newfoundland and down the Maine coast, and returned. There were trading posts all along the coast. Those who came were almost all young, single, and male. They stayed for awhile and then returned to England or Amsterdam. They were bold merchant adventurers.

However, the settlement at Popham on the Kennebec River in Maine was quickly decimated by famine and death in 1607. Further south, Jamestown in Virginia nearly failed that same year. In 1609, Henry Hudson sailed up the Mahicantuck River, now known as the Hudson, for the Dutch East India Company. So during their years in Leiden, in the Netherlands, the word on the street was that there was good land in the northern part of Virginia, along the River, (think somewhere around Newark Int'l airport!).

And so the religious community decided to go for it. What made the Mayflower different was the women and children, whole families travelling together. This was intended to be a permanent settlement. They came as a religious community and sold all they had for this endeavor. However, even all that they had wasn't enough to pay for the voyage and the provisions, so in order to pay for the trip, the Separatists indentured themselves, agreeing to work for seven years, in order to pay for their voyage, and for their land and homes. They were giving their money, seven years of their lives, and the future of their families. They were living Matthew 25.

But instead of the owner – master – Lord – the investor going away, the investor stayed put and the servants were the ones who took the journey, taking the money and supplies with them, with the goal of earning a return on the investors' wealth. We know the story. Whether it's Matthew or Luke telling it, two of the servants invest the money and either double it (Matthew) or increase it tenfold or fivefold (Luke). It's either three months' wages (Luke) or a lifetime of wages (Matthew). But one of the servants is afraid, and hides the money – buries it to keep it safe so that he can return it to the investor.

I find the owner's response really interesting – that he should have at least invested the money with the bankers, in order to earn interest. They had bankers 2,000 years ago? I wasn't expecting ATMs and online banking, but what would they have been like? Modern banking as we know it originated in Amsterdam in 1609. The Greek word for "banker" is similar to the word for tables. Where have we heard that one before, Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the Temple? It's in all four of the gospels. Clearly, Jesus was not happy with the moneychangers. I'm not so sure what he'd think of the bankers!

Whether you're thinking of the servants in Matthew, or the Pilgrims, or yourself, how does it feel to be entrusted with someone else's wealth? I don't even do well with plant sitting, or pet sitting. I'm especially careful when driving other people. I know that if I were entrusted with a huge sum of money, the last thing I would do would be to gamble with it. I might be a very cautious investor, but definitely would at least keep it safe in a bank rather than burying it in the sand!

That's where we are today – politically, environmentally, religiously. We've been entrusted with someone else's wealth – the democracy of the next generation, the climate of the next generation, the church of the next generation. What gives me the most hope these days is that people have become more involved – recognizing that democracy has been entrusted in our hands and investing their time and their contributions for its future. We've also been entrusted with the climate. What gives me hope is awareness and green initiatives and carbon neutral goals, solar and wind power, electric cars, and the

recognition that we have to change. It's similar with the pandemic. We've been entrusted with others' health, and had to switch our mindset from protecting ourselves to protecting others. Our responsibility to wear our masks and stay apart has shifted from self-preservation to protecting the common good.

And here, at First Church, we've been entrusted with the church of the next generation. Like the Separatists, it's not all new territory. We know what we are called to do; we just have to do it. I've talked to many people over these past several months about finances and the economy. About what's different and what's the same. Many are finding that usual sources of income are reduced or threatened. They may have had to retire early or leave a job. Others have had no change. And some have had more work as people's needs have shifted. Most of us have found reduced expenses in some areas, or at least some ways that we're spending differently. Our priorities have shifted as well. Activities we have enjoyed are on hiatus. Movies and restaurants are not an option. If we do get take out, we're tipping differently, appreciative for the restaurant!

On this Stewardship Sunday, we invite you to take this moment to look at your financial life with the new perspective that this unforgettable year has brought us. Evaluate what's important. Give differently. What do you want to be sure to support? What are you doing without? What are your guiding principles about how much you choose to give? Are you like our church, contributing a percentage of your income to various charitable organizations? Or do you give from the first fruits of your labors? When you support the church, you are not giving money "away", but you are pooling a portion of your resources for our common work as a congregation. Ministry we do together. Reaching out in mission together as a community.

We have had to do our annual Stewardship campaign differently this fall, asking you to communicate your financial pledge and your interests to us online. But we're having fun with it, too: boxing up a thank-you gift for you when you pledge your time, talent or treasure for 2021, and showing our results week-by-week on the stewardship page of our website. We invite you to pledge your support for this community of faith this week, so that we can include your pledge in our total as we discuss and vote on our 2021 budget next Sunday.

This year, more than ever, we understand what it means to live in an in-between time. Like the Separatists, just offshore, with dreams for a future community. Investing our lives in things we truly believe in. We are watching the next presidential administration take shape, between now and the January inauguration. We know, with heavy hearts, that we have more pandemic isolation to endure before we can gather together once again, sometime next year. It is an in-between time, an extraordinary time. But extraordinary time can call for an extraordinary response and extraordinary gifts. Through it all, we are being asked what we are willing to contribute to make it happen. As we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival on these shores of our spiritual ancestors, we know we have much to learn. But we know as well that the community depends on us and asks us to invest our whole lives in Jesus' work, Jesus' ministry, and Jesus' name. Amen