

“...9/10 of the Law”

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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**CHRISTIANITY IN AMERICA IS DEAD! SUNDAY SCHOOL IS DEAD!
YOUTH MINISTRY IS DEAD!**

Surveys and polls show that Christianity in the United States of America is showing a dramatic decline. In our context, 2015 statistics for the United Methodist Church in the US show an average decline of 5.74% in membership throughout the US Jurisdictions from the previous two years. More recent figures favor the trend. So... Methodism in America may not be dead yet, but if these trends continue, it may be soon.

During a youth consultation with Neal Bowes over the summer, we heard from Neal some insight into Bishop Bickerton’s position on Sunday School. I can recall very clearly, “Sunday School is dead.” Christian formation programs for children, youth, and adults have made a dramatic change in the past couple generations. No matter the mentality for bringing or not bringing children to Sunday School, attendance and participation in Christian Education has taken a back seat to athletics, community activities, family time, or extra hours of sleep over the weekend.

Youth ministry has become something unrecognizable. The youth of today have different needs, ways of connecting, ways of communicating than generations before them. They are faced with different choices, and different cultural norms than my generation and earlier faced. This is a different time. Youth ministry as we knew it is gone. The problem is that many churches have not adapted and are still trying to bring back the youth ministry of the leaders’ youth days.

So... American Christianity as we know it... Sunday School as we know it... Youth Ministry as we know it... are Dead.

But surely I tell you, that we serve a God that specializes in bringing dead things back to life. That’s right, we serve a God that specializes in bringing dead things back to life.

With prayer and guidance Mary Taylor’s youth program has started a new chapter, Sunday School has reached an era of “2.0,” and today, we celebrated the spiritual formation of our young people through the presentation of Bibles and in a few minutes, we will receive new members into this congregation of the United

Methodist Church. In the words of the late Bishop Martin D. McLee, “God is up to something” here at Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church.

Our Gospel reading from Matthew today is called the Parable of the Talents. When we hear the word “talent,” we often think of something we are good at. Maybe we sing, play an instrument, play a sport... there are many skills and/or abilities that we classify as talents. This passage, however; is referring to a monetary unit called a talent. A talent is approximately 15 years’ wages as a laborer.

The passage clearly tells us that there was a man who had slaves. As he was going away for a long, unknown period of time, he “entrusted” (and we’ll get back to that word in a minute) to them various amounts of money; five talents, two talents, and one talent; knowing the capabilities of each of his slaves. Put into what it is worth; the first slave was entrusted with 75 years worth of human labor, the second with 30, and the third with 15 years.

The word “entrusted” is a powerful word that we find used here. Verse 14 in the King James version is worded differently; “For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods.” Looking at both of these translations together, we get a more complete story of what the master was doing as he “entrusted” his wealth to his slaves.

To entrust something to someone and deliver it into their care is to give them possession. In their stewardship of the five and two talents, the first two slaves recognized what their master had done. Often we hear that possession is (*choir responds, 9/10 of the law*). That’s right, 9/10 of the law. This old cliché helps define ownership of an item when true ownership is difficult to ascertain. The master gave over 100 years worth of human labor to his three slaves. The first two slaves took ownership of their master’s wealth, and the third did not.

This parable is meant for us this morning to be a lesson in ownership. We just had a stewardship campaign where we discussed giving to God what God is worth and giving thanks for all that God has given to us. This passage is not meant as an approval of the “prosperity Gospel,” but as a lesson for us to be vigilant: not only with our finances, but with our lives as Christian disciples.

What is a “talent” today? What is it, as servants in God’s world today that we are being entrusted with? It is our salvation through Jesus Christ and salvation of the generations that come after us. The Epistle to the believers in Thessalonica tells of the time of the master’s return, as in the Gospel lesson this morning. It tells us, as disciples today, what to do in preparing for Christ’s return. We are being

told, “WAKE UP!” It is only in being awake to God’s work in the world that we can share in building up disciples for Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the world¹.

We have been entrusted with the Gospel truth, to share with those around us. It is not meant to be a secret that this is where we gather on Sunday morning. If this is the only time we share in living out our faith, we are like the slave who was given one talent and buried it. It returned nothing. There was no transformation. The master could have buried it for safekeeping on his own.

No, we are called to put on the breastplate of faith and love. Faith in God and love for one another are inseparable. Faith that God has done something great to provide us with a way to salvation, and love for one another that pushes us to share that with others. As the breastplate, faith and love protect our vulnerable heart. The hope of salvation protects our head, as a helmet- with hope, we are encouraged and lifted up. With hope comes freedom. Freedom to encourage others and build them up in the body of Christ.

Earlier, I said that we serve a God that specializes in bringing dead things back to life. The Bible is filled with stories of resurrection. What we learn from these accounts of resurrection is that when God brings someone or something back to life, there is a marked difference, they no longer look as they had before. When Jesus came to Mary in the garden, Mary could not recognize him until he said her name aloud.

American Christianity is different from what it once was. Churches that are embracing this difference are growing. Christian education is different from what it once was. Sunday schools all over are doing away with programming and curriculum that does not embrace the technology with which the young people of today learn. Youth ministry is different today. Communication and connections are made through very different mediums.

Often people are resistant to change; we must learn to embrace it, or face the extinction of Christianity in America. We have the greatest opportunity to live and share our truth of salvation through Jesus Christ with the world, if only we embrace the changing times in the way we communicate, the way we connect with one another.

We have been entrusted with Christ’s church, here in this community. We have been entrusted with a Gospel message that was not our own, but is now ours to share. We have been entrusted with the salvation offered through Christ’s sacrifice of himself on a cross, not only for our own benefit, but for that of those who we surround ourselves with and those who will come after us. We have been

entrusted with generations who so desperately are seeking to find their place, who desire to make a difference in the world.

It is with this message of faith, love, and hope that we have been entrusted to share, not keep to ourselves. It is our possession, freely offered to us. In sharing our salvation with others, we lose nothing, but the offering God gave for us is multiplied.

As we sit down at the Thanksgiving table this year, let us be grateful for our salvation in Jesus Christ, once accepted and once we take it as our possession, it will never lose its value. But in sharing it, we may transform the world.