Full notecard

WELCOME

Grace and Peace be with you, friends.

Welcome to First UCC in Second Life!

My name SL name is Alder Wyldewood, in RL I am Hazel Knight, and I am one of the servant leaders in this community.

Anyone you see around here with a “Minister” tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life and as a seminary grad and chaplain,
I am on that journey toward ordination with this real live church community- thanks be to God!

We are First United Church of Christ and Conference Center in Second Life, a recognized congregation with full standing in the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ.

Whether you're a longtime member of this community, visiting for the first time, or just happened to wander in wondering what this place is all about, we're glad you're here.

No matter who you are,
or where you are on life’s journey,
you are welcome here.

Just a quick reminder that our music will be on the media viewer, so please be sure your voice and media are turned on.

If you’re not sure how to do that, just let someone know and we’ll gladly help.

There will also be a link in Nearby Chat so you can
watch in your browser if the viewer isn’t working for you.

As a real UCC congregation, we help support the wider church in prayer and in finances.

We’re deeply grateful for any offering you feel led to share.

There is a donation bowl in the back by the door.
If you prefer you can also donate on our website at firstuccsl.org/donate, using Zeffy or Zelle.

Opening prayer
Gracious and loving God, already in our midst, may our time together today be lovely in your sight, nourishing in our spirits and inspiring in our world.
Amen

And now for our gathering song and some church announcements.

Gathering Song -

Ripple

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHo1fNnXFVU&t=62s

Church Announcements

This season in morning meditation we will be reading the poetry of Mary Oliver and practicing the three-tier listening of lection divina.

Meditation is on Monday, and Fridays at 8 am (all times Pacific)

Evening Psalter
5pm Tues, Wed, Thu, sometimes other days

And be on the lookout for Advent, Blue Christmas and Christmas Eve/Day gathering opportunities in the coming weeks.

Now our SCRIPTURES

Today's reading comes from the gospel of Matthew Chapter 25: verses 14-30, reading from the Message

14-18 "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities.

To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities.

Then he left.

Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master's investment. The second did the same.

But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master's money.

19-21 "After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them.
The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment.
His master commended him: 'Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.'

22-23 "The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master's investment.

His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’

24-25 “The servant given one thousand said, ‘Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.’

26-27 “The master was furious. ‘That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least?
The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

28-30 “‘Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.’

The Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God??

And our secular text today is from Anaïs Nin

"And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom"

Prayer

God, I pray that you will speak through me and that you will speak in spite of me so that what we hear is your word for us and what we understand is you extravagant love for us.

SERMON - Hopeful imagination

When Pastor Yadi invited me to preach again, I was honored and excited.

It’s Mid-November. Thanksgiving is just a few weeks away. So I had every intention of pulling together a fun little homily about gratitude because I have a LOT to say about the power of gratitude.

Gratitude challenges the myth of scarcity, subverts the industrial growth machine that tells us we don’t have enough and we are not enough.
I love to wax on about how keeping a daily gratitude practice actually rewires our brains to be on the lookout for good in the world rather than on high alert for the bad stuff.

A sermon on gratitude would’ve been easy peasy AND given me a perfect excuse to avoid preaching on this week's lectionary text.

For those who aren't familiar, the Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture readings followed by many Christian denominations.

And It's kinda cool - Christians from different traditions, all over the world, encounter the same texts each Sunday, interpreted and preached through different theological lenses.

Not all churches follow it, not by a long shot, but many do. So in the best-case scenario, we'd be talking to one another, engaging in rigorous and grace-filled dialogue about what our preachers brought up for us.

Well, you know. If we weren't all so divided. But I digress

This week's text is a hard one. Kinda cringe even.

It's one of those passages that has been interpreted in some harmful ways, particularly by those in the prosperity gospel camp, where wealth and financial success are treated as evidence of God's favor.

So, given the choice between a sermon on gratitude or wrestling with a parable about a harsh master who throws a servant into the outer darkness for his lackluster investment scheme,
you can probably guess which one I preferred.

But what I've learned over the years is, the texts I most want to avoid are sometimes the ones I most need to engage.

So for days, I've been wrestling with this text.

And as I was doing that, something Mary Oliver wrote in her essay Of Power and Time kept floating through my mind.

"It is six A.M., and I am working. I am absentminded, reckless, heedless of social obligations, etc. It is as it must be. T
he tire goes flat, the tooth falls out, there will be a hundred meals without mustard.
The poem gets written.
I have wrestled with the angel and I am stained with light and I have no shame. Neither do I have guilt."

— Mary Oliver, Upstream: Selected Essays

"I have wrestled with the angel and I am stained with light"

Oof, I love that image.

Because sometimes the things worth wrestling with leave us changed.

And, as far as I can tell, that's what scripture is supposed to do.
Not simply confirm what we already believe, but challenge us, unsettle us, and

invite us to imagine something new.

So let's wrestle with this parable together.

Last night as I was mulling over how to approach our text, my wife and I watched one of her favorite films, a first watch for me - Shall We Dance, the original Japanese film from the 1990s -
and as we were watching, I began to see this theme of risking everything for a life fully lived.

In the film, we meet Sugiyama, a middle-aged businessman whose life has settled into a pretty predictable routine.

Work, home, sleep, repeat. Until one day, he happens looks up from his train commute and notices a woman in a ballroom dance studio. And the next day he looks up on purpose.

And for days the windows to his own soul seem to have a new light. And then finally, right as the doors of the train are about to slide shut at the dance studio stop, he jumps through the doors.

Clearly afraid, embarrassed and unsure, he walks into the dance studio and signs up for classes before he even knows what he’s gotten himself into.

There he meets Mai, a former competitive dancer whose own life has been shaped by disappointment and injury.

Now, learning to dance might not sound like a particularly courageous act, but for Sugiyama,
it means risking embarrassment, judgment, and perhaps even shame in an incredibly repressed (by American ideas) and conservative culture. And all for what?

Not money. Not success. Just the possibility of discovering a little more joy in his life.

Now a talent in Jesus' time wasn't a special ability, the way we use the word today. It has nothing to do with being an artist, a writer or even a dancer.

It was an enormous amount of money, perhaps fifteen or twenty years' wages for an ordinary laborer.

In today’s parable a man, a wealthy man who owns land and humans, leaves money with some of his servants.

And it is A LOT of money.

So even the person who receives only one talent has been entrusted with something extraordinary.

Two invest what they've been given and double it. The third buries his money in the

ground.

When the master returns, the first two are rewarded, and the third is punished rather spectacularly.

The third servant explains his decision to bury what was entrusted to him with three words:

"I was afraid."

And if we read this as a straightforward description of how God operates,
we end up with a God who sounds less like the source of extravagant love and more like a particularly unpleasant investment banker.

Not exactly the good news I come to church hoping to hear.

But I think there's something much more interesting happening here.

The third servant explains his decision to bury what was entrusted to him with three words:

"I was afraid."

I'd like to let those words invite us to consider the relationship between fearful imagination and hopeful imagination.

We tend to think of imagination as something creative. Something artists and poets use.
Something children have in abundance and adults sometimes forget how to practice.

But imagination isn't always hopeful.

Both fear and hope begin with the same two words.

What if?

What if I fail?

What if I lose everything?

What if people make fun of me?

What is my parents throws me out of the house?

What if things get worse?

We all know those questions. Some of us are exceptionally good at asking them. If catastrophizing were an Olympic sport, I would medal in it for sure!

When fear becomes the loudest voice, we can find ourselves living in a constant

state of vigilance. Always expecting the worst of the world, of others, even of ourselves.

Hopeful imagination asks a different question.

What if this goes really well?

What if she says yes?

What if I discover something I didn't know I was capable of?

What if I win the dance competition?

What if I double my money?

What if things could actually change?

What if I could make a difference?

Maybe hopeful imagination isn't about being certain that everything will be fine.

Faith doesn't require us to eliminate fear.

Faith is about refusing to believe that the worst thing we can imagine is the only thing that can happen.

Faith invites us to risk living fully for the sake of something beyond ourselves.

The question isn't simply what we've been given.

It's what we do with it.

Maybe to better understand what I mean, it might help to remember where today’s parable sits in the larger scope the Gospel.

It's right smack dab in the middle of three stories Jesus tells near the end of his teaching ministry.

The parable right before this one is about bridesmaids waiting for a wedding celebration. That one is a story about staying awake, paying attention and being ready.

Be mindful.

Then comes our story about the talents, with its questions about fear and risk.

Be daring.

And immediately afterward comes the story of the sheep and the goats,
where Jesus is abundantly clear that when we feed the hungry, welcome strangers,

care for the sick, and visit prisoners, we are dong all those things to Jesus.

Be generous.

Mindful. Daring. Generous.

Together, these stories ask a question:
How will we live while the world is still becoming what God dreams it can be?

When our Japanese businessman Sugiyama takes a daring leap of faith, he embarks on a journey of self-expression, vulnerability, and human connection.

He works really hard, falls in love with dancing, becomes a beloved member of a larger community,
supports others struggling to live into their dreams and enlarges his own life in ways he had not thought possible, because he didn’t give fear the final say.

He wakes up, he dares to take a risk and in investing in himself, and as a result, his life spills over and nourishes the lives of others.

See, these lives we've been given aren't simply ours to keep.

They are ours to invest in our little corner of creation.

Not for the sake of accumulating more wealth or power, but for the sake of the web of interbeing.

And that brings us back to imagination.

Because fear and hope are both ways of imagining a future that hasn't happened yet.

Fear imagines what could go wrong.

Hope imagines what might become possible.

And both can influence what we do today.

Don;t get me wrong, fear isn't necessarily a bad thing. It helps us recognize danger. It can protect us and the people we love.

Sometimes fear is telling us something important, and we ought to listen.

Yes, Sugiyama did face ridicule. Yes it nearly destroyed his family. Yes he had to do really hard things.

But fear can also become so loud that it drowns out every other possibility.

We begin treating what might happen as though it will happen.

We stop trying.

We stop reaching out.

We stop imagining that anything could be different.

And sometimes we bury parts of ourselves.

Not necessarily in the ground.

Maybe under work.

Maybe under booze, or shopping or doom scrolling.

Maybe beneath the need to be perfect, to be liked, or to have everything figured out before we begin.

Most times we don't even realize we're doing it.

We've become so busy protecting ourselves from what might go wrong that we've forgotten to ask what might go right.

As one generally allergic to Pollyanna positivity,
I whole heartedly agree that hope is toxic when it suppresses authentic feelings, discourages honest communication, oversimplifies complex issues and neutralizes engaged action.

Hope doesn't mean ignoring suffering or pretending that injustice, grief, and loss aren't real.

But, the powers and principalities of this world don't want us to have hope, because if we are hopeless we don't believe change is possible, we won't even try, and nothing in fact changes.
Hope is defiant in the face of despair.

It's something we practice. Like the Japanese business man who keeps going to a dance class even though he’s pretty bad, at first.

And he’s scared.

Active hope doesn't have to begin with something enormous.

What if I knocked on that door?

What if I picked up the phone?

What if I spoke up when someone said something mean on social media?

What if I offered my time to a local bunch of do-gooders?

What if I helped create a little more kindness, a little more justice, a little more

belonging?

And what if I didn't have to know whether my efforts would succeed before I began?

And that's where I hear the invitation in this parable.

Not that God expects us to double our money.

And certainly not that our worth is measured by productivity.

And good grief, not that we should take foolish risks to please someone powerful.

But that the extraordinary gift of just being alive comes with possibilities.

Luke's Gospel puts it this way:

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” Luke 12:48

Or, if you prefer your theology with a little more spandex, Spider-Man's Uncle Ben famously tells Peter Parker:
"With great power comes great responsibility."

Next week’s parable helps us understand what those responsibilities are.

Jesus doesn't ask whether people have accumulated enough wealth or achieved enough success.

He asks whether they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison.

That's what hopeful imagination looks like when it becomes generosity.

It's not simply imagining a better world.

It's about collaborating with God, using the life we’ve been given, to be the change we week in the world.

And perhaps that's the question worth carrying home today.

"What might be possible if fear didn't get the final word?"

What if we allowed ourselves to imagine a world more compassionate, more just, and more generous than the one we know today?

And what if we took one small step toward it?

We don't have to be fearless.

We simply have to remember that fear isn't the only thing capable of shaping our

imagination.

Hope can do that, too.

And perhaps faithfulness begins when we allow hope to have a voice.

So this week, when you find yourself asking, "What if everything goes wrong?"

I invite you to make room for another question.

"What if something good could grow from what I do next?"

And perhaps the most important question we can ask isn't, "How much have I gained?"

It's "What has flourished because I was here?"

Because someday, everything we have been given will return to the earth.

These bodies, these borrowed breaths, these brief and beautiful lives.

We are, in a very real sense, borrowing ourselves from the cosmos.

And eventually, we have to give ourselves back.

So what will we do with the time between?

I don't believe that God is waiting at the end of our lives to calculate whether we have doubled our original investment.

But I do wonder what will remain of the love we dared to give away.

Perhaps a person who felt less alone because we listened.

Perhaps a community that became a little more welcoming
because someone was willing to challenge an old assumption.

Perhaps a patch of earth that flourished because someone cared enough to protect it.

Perhaps a life that made another life a little more possible.

And I think that's the kind of abundance worth pursuing.

Not the abundance of accumulation.

But the abundance of participation.

The abundance that comes when we stop asking how much we can keep and begin asking how much good we can help bring into being.

And may we remember that this brief and beautiful life is not something we possess

forever.

It is something we receive.

Something we can tend.

Something we can share.

And eventually, something we return to the Great Mystery.
I pray that you will chose hopeful imagination over fearful imagination

Don't bury your life.

Risk living fully.

And dare to imagine the resulting abundance.

Amen.

Question for discussion

What gifts have you buried, for fear of disappointing yourself or others?

What good thing in your life can you double (or triple, for that matter), maybe even for the benefit of others?

[Pause for reflection and chat responses.]

As this song plays, let's chat…

Courage to Change - Sia
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YAA8vaDfCRk

Amen.

PRAYER PREPARATION

We have come to the time where we come together in prayer.

Let us give thanks for the gift of this day

and pray for the life of the world.

If you have a prayer of joy or concern that you wish to lift to God, and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, we invite you to share.

COMMUNITY PRAYER

We come together today carrying all sorts of things in our hearts. Some bring worries, grief, or uncertainty. Others bring good news, gratitude, and reasons to celebrate. And most of us carry a little of both.

This is a time to share our joys and concerns, to hold one another in love, and to remember that none of us walks this journey alone.

What prayers would you like to lift up today? You're welcome to share in text, or simply hold them quietly in your heart.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy One,
We come today carrying both hope and fear, gratitude and grief. Remind us that we don't need to know what tomorrow holds to live with courage and compassion today.

We pause now to share the concerns and sorrows in our hearts, trusting that no one should have to carry their burdens alone.
And we make room for joy, for gratitude, celebrations, and the unexpected goodness that finds us along the way.

For all that has been shared, and all that remains unspoken, we give thanks.

May we be mindful of one another, daring in our hope, and generous with our love.

And when fear asks, "What if everything goes wrong?" help us imagine what good might still be possible.
May our lives become part of that possibility.
Amen.

BENEDICTION - from + John O'Donohue

TO COME HOME TO YOURSELF
May all that is unforgiven in you,
Be released.
May your fears yield
Their deepest tranquillities.
May all that is unlived in you,
Blossom into a future,
Graced with love.

Music for the Journey -

Sara Bareilles - Brave

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUQsqBqxoR4