

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
November 15, 2020
Preached via Zoom during COVID

Some of you know that Travis and I bought an historic but much neglected home in Bay View two years ago. Imagine a house with holes in the ceiling in multiple places, stained carpet covering wood flooring, peeling wallpaper, mice in the kitchen drawers, a yard filled with old dog run accoutrement, and not one corner that was anything approaching clean, then you have an idea of what we were working with.

That first winter, we also learned that the heat doesn't work particularly well. So we sort of shivered our way through the cold months bundled up with blankets and wool socks while we slowly stripped walls, tore up carpet, repaired plaster, and cleaned every square inch on the house.

About halfway through that first winter, we accidentally discovered that our fireplace was actually pretty nice. The fireplace is one of those wood burning steel inserts that has a knob on it. We had tried to turn the knob several times, and nothing happened, so we just assumed it was broken or improperly installed like most everything else in the house.

Then one cold day, we had the fire on for about an hour, and I must have put the dial in the correct position, because all of a sudden a blower engaged and began filling the whole first floor with the most wonderful heat. I mean, this was a REALLY good fireplace insert. It was so strange that the owners had spent literally no money on any upkeep anywhere in the house but somehow installed a first rate fireplace with a heavenly heat blower. But what I learned is that the blower will only engage when the fire gets hot enough, and that takes right around an hour.

What does any of this have to do with church? I'm glad you asked. I'm pretty sure you have all heard the parable of the talents most of your lives. The master has three servants — to one he gives one talent (think of it like a thousand dollars), another receives two talents, and a third receives five. The second and third servants invest their earnings and are able to return to the master double what he entrusted to him, while the first servant buried his talent to protect it from thieves and ended up returning to the master with just the original money that he'd been given.

In a pretty harsh display of judgment, the master praises the two cleverly investing servants and condemns the other to a vague damnation. The end.

Mostly, after listening to a text like this, the parish might do some soul searching to see which servant we are most like? Are we burying our treasure just to keep it safe, or are we investing it in God's kingdom and watching it grow. The preacher might suggest that we could do better and that, in fact, we must do better so that we don't end up like that poor wretch who is cast into outer darkness.

Here's the twist though: in this sermon, I'm actually going to tell you I think you are all doing quite the bang up job of managing your talents during this pandemic. Maybe we can have a larger conversation at some point about how we are doing in our investments more broadly speaking, but for now, I am so, so thrilled that you have taken what God has provided, and even in the adversity of the pandemic, invested it to watch it grow.

You have raised well over fifteen thousand dollars to give to community organizations fighting hunger and isolation during COVID. You've donated over twelve thousand dollars to the rector's discretionary account for direct housing aid to people in emergencies. We have blessed over two hundred cars, collected supplies for The Gathering, and diapers for Robin's Nest. We have prayed together over two hundred and fifty times, all over Zoom. We have read six books together as a community, watched over twenty films and enjoyed fellowship and conversation in Happy Hour and after Sunday worship. As if that wasn't enough, we raised the operating budget for 2021 and, somehow, actually grew our parish by several members. And we did all of it during a global pandemic.

So, I find myself in a strange place as a preacher. Instead of pointing out the pitfalls of doing things wrong — pointing out the cautionary tale that is our parable today — instead I'm just going to tell you that you have done really well. You have kept yourself focused on God and on the care and concern of one another. You've checked in on those who live alone, and you've done a wonderful job of remembering those in the community who are in need. There will be plenty of sermons where we can talk about the depravities of sin, but I think today we will focus instead of the wonderful blessings we have received together even in the midst of this terrible pandemic.

So, the fireplace. When I want to get the house nice and toasty, I have to invest a whole hour and lots of wood before my fancy blower begins to send out that luxurious heat into the bones of my old house. That's what we are doing in this pandemic. It's cold and dark out, and with our prayers and kindness to one another, we are just adding logs to the first hour by hour, day by day, and month by month. And one of these times, we will be back together, and all this time and energy we invested in this parish will pay off in warmth and a magnificently cozy home. We're laying the fire now, knowing that the warmth is several months away. We're investing our talents knowing that in the future our pay off is going to be great.

And we are doing this all, not for the glory of us, but instead for the glory of God, who loved us into being, came in the person of Jesus, and taught us how to pray and how to live. So, keep it up, my good people. You have been given a mighty inheritance and the pandemic has provided a mighty burden. Keep the faith. Keep doing what you're doing. And we will be together on the other side of this, toasty as can be. Amen.