

“Being a Church During In-Between Times”

Matthew 25:14-30

Psalm 22:1-15

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Raise your hand if you remember having a substitute teacher when you were in school. Do you ever recall—or if you are Peter or Dan—were you the perpetrator—of someone taking advantage of the substitute teacher by changing seats or claiming that wasn't really the assignment your regular teacher gave?

Having a substitute teacher creates a unique and not-always-the-best situation—for students or for teachers. For students who are invested heavily in the regular teacher and are well into pleasing them along the learning path, a substitute can throw a student out of their comfort zone. Likewise, the substitute teacher either has become comfortable with their role or they have arrived in front of this group of about 25 strangers with a high level of in trepidation.

Sometimes the substitute relationship lasts for a longer time than the day or two of illness that is typical. This usually is a result of maternity leave and when that happens things are different. For one thing the person assigning the long-term substitute will factor in the reality that this will not simply be a high level of baby sitting for a day or two, but this will require that the substitute keep the students on track in their educational endeavor—and that the teacher has some capabilities to establish longer, albeit still temporary relationships.

No doubt you have already spotted my not too subtle example of the period you are all entering with the departure of one pastor and the unknown ahead of you. Unknown as to who will be the substitute—unknown as to how long the interim period will last—unknown if you will like them—if they will like you—and so on and so forth. As you have been told, your Session is, being the good leadership they are, handling the choice of an interim—your long term substitute—as we speak.

But let's state the obvious and then proceed to what this morning's text says to us in this circumstance. While the unknowns are abundant and clear—what is known?

Several things are in the known column:

You know you are a healthier congregation overall as a result of the last seven plus years. No matter how you measure, you are stronger internally and you have a shining reputation externally. You know you have even addressed those often unappreciated issues concerning your buildings. You know there is a tried and tested process in place for seeking new pastoral leadership. And you know that week in and week out there will be quality worship, solid educational opportunities and the great fellowship that is Woodhaven. You can list other knowns in the life of the congregation.

This morning I invite you to join me in looking at the parable just read and then we can take from that and make somewhat of a “to do list” for this time with a long term substitute teacher.

The setting for Jesus sharing this parable with his disciples is the Mount of Olives and they are having some private time together. It is perhaps helpful to the disciples that the time is private because it is here

that Jesus has given them as strong a picture as he can that his time with them is about to end—that he will be leaving them—and that the timing of his return is not to be known, but it is to be anticipated.

In this parable a man who is going to take a long trip and he is making preparations for his property, his goods, to be managed in his absence. For you that means the role of pastor is changing and one has left and, while she will not return, the role of permanent, installed pastor, will one day be restored so we need to see what to do in the meantime.

The Biblical story is about the Kingdom of God and it is familiar, but to help us hear it fresh, let's translate it into modern language: "It's also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his employees 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 employee went to work and eventually doubled the owner's investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried the boss's money.

After a long absence, the owner of the company came back and settled up with the three of them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. The owner commended him: "Good work! You did your job well. From now on you are my partner."

The employee with two thousand showed he also had doubled the owner's investment. The owner commended him too. "Good work! You did your job well. From now on you are my partner."

But the employee given one thousand said, "Sir, 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."

The owner was furious. "That's a terrible way to live! It's almost criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The minimum you could have done would have been to invest the money with the bank, where at least I would have gotten interest. Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this "play it safe guy" who would not go out on a limb. Get him out of my sight."

Let me note a couple of things so that your mind doesn't waste time on the non-essential. This is not a 2009 story—we all know that there is nowhere to invest and double your money today and even putting it in the bank doesn't earn much interest—but those are not the points of the story.

As a matter of fact, I caution you to even dwell on the math and the money. This isn't a parable about math, investing or management relationships and partnerships. No, this is a parable about risk, responsibility and accountability. And risk, responsibility and accountability are all very important to a church being the church during in between times—during an interim period—when the normal management has left for an extended and unknown period of time.

What took place in this story is that the owner took a risk in leaving his business in the hands of others and departed. But it was a calculated risk in that he gave to the three differing amounts in what scripture says were "according to their abilities."

The two employees who managed to please the owner upon his return knew that it was their responsibility to handle the owner's money in such a manner that would be favorable upon his return—whenever that was—because this is not their money and they are accountable to him.

Contrast that, if you will, with the third employee, who instead said to himself—this is about me. I need to protect me. I will hoard and hide this money and eliminate risk because I am afraid of failure in the eyes of the boss—I may not thrill the boss, but at least he can't be upset that anything was lost during his absence. Those other guys can go and try to make what they were given increase, but it might not increase and I will look good because I know I will give back to the owner every dime he entrusted to me. Let's be real, this isn't about doing well with the owner's money, this is about me looking good and safe when the day is done.

I said earlier that this parable is about risk, responsibility and accountability. This third employee, this third servant in the original text—has in essence said—“I am responsible for myself and I am accountable to myself—therefore I will not take a risk that will endanger me in the eyes of the boss.” What he discovered in a harsh way is that he was wrong. He was not asked to be responsible for himself, but for the owner's money. He was not expected to be accountable to himself, but to the owner. And in his effort to avoid risk he forgot that risk is always built in to every situation. What we know and he forgot is that we can't avoid risk; we can simply choose our risk. He avoided the risk of losing money and ended up taking the risk that he would terribly disappoint the boss. Sure he did not lose any money—but he did lose his job. In life and in the church, we can't avoid risk—we can simply identify the various risks and choose the one that best suits what we want to accomplish.

By contrast the first two individuals in the parable transformed a privilege into action. They made an assessment regarding the responsibility entrusted to them, acknowledged to whom they were accountable and then set forth to make the best use of the time the master or owner was away.

So what does this text say to the special people gathered in what is known as Woodhaven Presbyterian Church? Well, certainly you are not without leadership—it's okay to feel the loss of a very special pastor—but between the remaining high quality lay and staff leadership and the interim who will soon join you, you will perk along in the coming months just fine.

But based on this parable and my familiarity with the pastor seeking process, let me take a moment to share a Top Ten list of what a congregation can do between installed pastors. You are about to hear my answer to your question as a member of the church when you ask “what can I do during this coming period so that I know I will have done my part?” This is not something published from headquarters—you are the first to hear them.

Knowing you want Woodhaven to continue to be strong in all its dimensions, here are some things every member can do over the next several months:

1. Pray for your church. That may sound odd or obvious, but the side benefit to the power of prayer itself is that doing so keeps you focused on what is really important in your shared ministry.
2. Create a strong and representative Pastor Nominating Committee. Recruit sharp, capable people who can work well together and will represent you favorably to prospective candidates. This is not the time to simply fill quotas or make someone feel needed.
3. After awhile it will be okay for you to suggest names of candidates that you hear about for the Pastor Nominating Committee to consider. They will already have access to those open to leaving their current situation, but often the best candidates are not looking to leave—with Shannon being a case in point when she came to you.
4. The corollary to that last one is to give the PNC the freedom to work in confidentiality and secrecy. Don't ask them about progress or try to get hints of names under consideration.

Don't even ask their spouses questions. And this means that if you suggest a name, don't do any follow up with the committee.

5. Use this interim period to tidy up any infrastructure things in the life of the church. I won't even venture to suggest what that might be, but if there is something that would make you better before your next installed pastor arrives, address it and don't wait until he or she gets here.
6. Affirm and support your interim pastor. It isn't their fault that you are looking for someone new so accept them for the role they have been led to fulfill with you.
7. As your PNC does its work, there will be a time when they are looking at candidates and then the time will come that candidates are looking at you. One of the most important things you can do to help the PNC is to keep Woodhaven attractive to prospective candidates—make them want to become your pastor. Keep your energy and care for one another strong.
8. This being attractive as a church can also be accomplished with maintaining solid attendance at worship and other activities.
9. Another way you can keep Woodhaven attractive to prospective candidates is to keep your giving strong. If your giving as a congregation drops off during the interim you will be saying collectively that you are a staff-dependent church in need of entertainment from the pastor—and that is not appealing to any prospective new pastor. Demonstrate that your giving is in response to what God is doing in your life, not whether there was a good stewardship campaign.
10. Lastly, a variation on the first one, keep the Pastor Nominating Committee in your prayers. Pray that they do together what we noted from the parable before—that they be willing to take the right risks—that they remain responsible in their task and that they remember they are ultimately accountable to God. And while you are at it, pray for that person God is preparing to be your new pastor. Right now they likely will have never heard of you—nor you they--but in a few months you will find yourself with a quickening pace of excitement as you are introduced to one another to start the next chapter in the ministry known as Woodhaven Presbyterian Church.

“For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property—each according to their ability...”

These days you all are in this in between experience together—and you have been entrusted with the shared life of this congregation—and each of you has your abilities to bring to bear on the life of the congregation. May I remind you that when Shannon was called to be your pastor you did the unprecedented act of hiring a woman who was very pregnant and full of new life and great possibilities. In her departure, it is noteworthy that as a congregation, while by no means pregnant, you are also full of new life and great possibilities.

Enjoy ministering together during these in between times. Enjoy the substitute teacher. Support one another and your pastor nominating committee. If you do all that, the time will fly by and when the “owner” returns—that new pastor arrives—it can be said that you were good and faithful servants and can be entrusted with more.

Amen.