

REFLECTION



Fairlawn Avenue
United Church

Rev. Dr. Ambury
Stuart

Sunday,
October 26, 2025



THANKS BE TO GOD FOR
FAIRLAWN AVENUE UNITED CHURCH

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Once again, I would like to thank the Explore Spirituality Committee for asking me to fill in for Cam for these past three weeks. Two weeks ago, on Thanksgiving Sunday, we thought about being thankful that we live in Canada, our Home and Native Land. Last week I continued on the Thanksgiving theme by thinking about how we are thankful for our United Church of Canada - our spiritual home where we live out that faith along with thousands of other United Church people across Canada. Both our nation and our denomination are living in perilous times: Canada is being threatened by outside forces that seek to absorb us and take possession of our physical resources. The United Church is also under threat, not by outside forces that want to take us over but by changes in society to which we must adapt.

Today, in my final sermon I would like to focus in on how we are thankful for our community of faith here at Fairlawn United Church. The United Church of Canada will only survive if its individual churches such as Fairlawn can adapt to the new world in which we are living.

The first task for any sermon writer is the selection of an appropriate scripture reading. So what scripture should I choose for a sermon about Fairlawn? Vicki and I were welcomed here over 10 years ago now, and as I reflected back on those years the words "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" flashed into my mind as representing the spiritual essence of the life we have found here at Fairlawn. These words come from the parable of the talents in the King James version of 25th chapter of Matthew, so listen now to our scripture reading for today:

14 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. 15 And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. 16 Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. 17 And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. 18 But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. 19 After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

20 "So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' 21 His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.' 22 He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' 23 His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

24 "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'

26 "But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. 27 So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

29 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.

Fairlawn is filled with more than its share of good and faithful servants. If you look through our 2024 Annual Report, you will read the story of an energetic, active congregation. Flip to the back page and you will find 23 e-mail addresses that you can use to connect with all committees, interest groups and special projects that we do here: For example, the first four groups (in alphabetical order) are "Affirm", "Book Sale", "Breast Cancer Support Group" and "Camp Scugog Team".

Canada and our national United Church are huge institutions that are hard for us to get our heads around sometimes. But all United Church people live out their lives within their local church communities. And while the General Council and other national bodies develop policies and act for the whole United Church, it is in the local churches that much of the work of the church is actually carried out. Without healthy local churches across Canada, the United Church of Canada would not exist.

Fairlawn is an one of those healthy churches - In the past few years we have been tested by a pandemic when the church was closed completely and a long period of interim ministry when we did much soul-searching and self- assessment. Nevertheless, we have survived these tests and come back stronger than ever because we are a resilient congregation of good and faithful people. We don't give up on our community of faith and we don't give up on one another and for that we can all be truly thankful.

In the parable of the talents, a powerful master, who we assume represents God, is leaving on a journey. He doesn't seem to know when he will return, but while he is away he has decided to let three of his servants invest his fortune. The servants are lucky that they have a good master who could just as easily declared them surplus and tossed them onto the street to beg. The master is also lucky to have such faithful servants. They remained faithful to their master when they could just as easily absconded with his money and disappeared. (Even one talent in Bible times was worth about 6000 days of wages for an unskilled labourer.) Instead of pocketing this vast wealth, all three servants stayed within the household of their master, and accepted his judgement on them when the master returned. There are no villains in this story. Everyone in this story is a good person: the master is fair and generous; the servants are faithful and honest. This scripture is all about good people.

The invested amounts are different, which probably reflects each servant's abilities. Presumably, the master knows his servants and has estimated what they are capable of. And

for two of the three servants, the master got it right. They invested their master's money, and were lucky that the markets did not crash and they doubled their master's investment in their abilities. The third servant let his master down by refusing to invest his money at all.

So what does this story say to us? While no master is giving us great wealth to invest for him, we in Canada have many blessings just the same. We live in a relatively prosperous country. We choose who will lead us in free and fair elections. We don't have to worry about our children being murdered in school shootings. Still, we live in perilous times right now. We are impacted by national and international events over which we have little or no control. For example, jobs in the car industry were lost just this week right here in Southern Ontario because of decisions made in Washington.

In the face of uncertain times and unpredictable foreign leaders, we look for stability closer to home, in the routine, day to day events that we can more directly control. A few months ago individual Canadians decided not to buy American fruits and vegetables if there were alternatives available and many of us also decided not to travel to the United States. And surprisingly, those decisions had a significant impact at a larger scale. Something similar happens in successful church communities when its faithful members volunteer their talents to help out the community. Some teach Sunday School, others serve on what used to be called the Session or the Board of Stewards, and everyone responds generously when the collection plate is passed around each Sunday. "Well done, you good and faithful servants".

We should never give up trying to change things for the better, but this does take faith and courage. It was Edmund Burke who said that the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing, and that is also the lesson of this parable. The third servant was paralyzed with fear. So much money; so much responsibility! Look for a safe harbour in the storm; Bury your talent in the ground. Say as little as possible.

Canadians are being bullied right now by the President of the United States, the most powerful person in the world. How should we respond? The first option might be to try to curry favour - that's what The Republican Party is doing, and what our former Prime Minister did when he made his trip to Mar A Lago immediately following the U.S. election. We learned that this strategy doesn't work and only encourages the bully. The second option might be to follow the third servant in the parable and "Go to ground". Bury your talent and your convictions. Try to get along. That didn't work for the third servant in the Bible story, which teaches us that going to ground and trying to become inconspicuous won't work for us either. The third option is the one chosen by the other two servants: We need to trust in God and to believe in ourselves. We need to use our talents and our resources so that we will be able to increase them and empower others to do the same. The phrase that expresses this option that we are hearing more and more these days is "Keep your stick on the ice Canada!" Keep our communities strong. Be there for one another.

I think we already know that here at Fairlawn. It seems that everyone is involved in some program or other. Our Annual Reports tell the tale. It is impressive that we are open to trying new things - that is how we can learn what God is calling us to do.

It is helpful to know that we are not alone in all that we do. Other United churches are also stepping up and doing their part. This week we heard about some encouraging developments happening at Emmanuel College that I would like to share with you.

As many of you will know, Emmanuel College in Victoria University, part of the University of Toronto is the largest theological college in the United Church of Canada. I was reading their fall newsletter this week, and learned of a new initiative by the college and the United Church of Canada to “craft a robust vision for theological education - one that challenges the narrative of decline and engages congregations and regions”. After months of collaboration and effort, Emmanuel College submitted a substantial grant request to the U.S. based Lily Foundation.

This week, Emmanuel College announced that it has won a \$1 Million (U.S.) dollar grant from the Lily Foundation to strengthen its Master of Divinity program for United Church ministers and to “launch a new continuing education centre to help both emerging and experienced church leaders adapt to the rapidly evolving changes in society”. In this announcement the acting principal at Emmanuel commented that “Many leaders in the United Church of Canada and other denominations are seeking new kinds of support to help them in their work, especially in urban centres with growing, diverse immigrant populations and in rural congregations where isolation can be a challenge. Traditional church attendance is declining while more people are becoming interested in spirituality inside and outside of organized religion.”

The Lily Foundation grant is amazing news, particularly since it is unusual for Canadian institutions to win such a large grant from an American foundation. Clearly, the excellence of Emmanuel college within the uniquely Canadian United Church of Canada impressed the Lily Foundation. This award gives all of us in the United Church much hope and encouragement as we continue to work to become the church for our time and place.

And so we can also go forward, despite all the uncertainty in the world, and the challenges facing the Church. We are thankful for Canada, our home and native land that both sustains us and challenges us to care for this land and preserve it for future generations of Canadians. We are thankful for The United Church of Canada, which was created 100 years ago to give “friendly service” to Canada, and which has provided a spiritual home for many Canadians ever since. Finally, we are thankful for Fairlawn Avenue United Church, our congregational family home in north Toronto, which strengthens us every week with inspired pastoral leadership, wonderful music, and a dizzying array of volunteer activities that serve the Church and the World.

For all of these great gifts, we give thanks to God.

Amen