

Carol M. Strickland
 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 33rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, November 19, 2017
 Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Athens Self-Storage

Introduction to Sermon

Our New Testament lesson is the well-known Parable of the Talents, according to Matthew's gospel. You'll recall that the man in the story gives his slaves talents. A talent was a unit of money, not a skill or ability as the word later came to mean in English because of this very parable. In fact, it was quite a large sum. In Luke's telling of the parable, the slaves receive only minas. But in Matthew's they receive talents. A talent was worth 60 times a mina. In today's dollars, the three slaves in Matthew's version receive the equivalent of roughly a million dollars, a half million, and a quarter million. So, in Matthew's telling, even the one-talent slave is entrusted with an very, very large sum. Think about this as you hear, once again, the Parable of the Talents. *Matthew 25:14-30.*

Sermon

If that parable is about anything, it's about taking risks. In that spirit, I'm going out on a limb this morning and delivering a quirky sermon. It's in blank verse. It's titled, "Athens Self-Storage."

You can drive down the one-block, dead-end street to the address 170 Security Circle
 and find the office for Athens Self-Storage.
 There a pleasant woman will sell you space in a beige corrugated metal building
 located not far away in the parking lot between the Kroger and a veterinarian clinic.
 It looks like a long expanse of row houses.
 Only these 78 self-storage units are one-story, windowless, crypt-like,
 with a padlock affixed to each identical door and a number plate over the lintel.
 I often wonder about the Athens selves stored there.
 Are they shut up in wooden crates and crammed in Rubbermaid totes?
 Or can they at least walk about their quarters and perhaps play a kazoo at night
 or fold paper airplanes to launch?
 They remain behind their numbered doors like chocolate candies hidden
 behind the doors of an Advent calendar, waiting to be released and relished.
 But these Athens selves have waited not days or weeks but years.
 What happened?
 Why are they here?
 Mostly, they are stashed away by their owners at about the age of reason,
 or maybe at puberty; perhaps later.

Their owners put them in storage whenever self-consciousness outweighed childhood,
when fear bullied freedom.

One Athens self stored in unit 27 is a four-year old boy who dropped to his knees
in the middle of a soccer game, ignoring the adult cries of “Kick the ball,”
and yelled for his teammates to come see a very cool caterpillar,
which they did while the opponents scored and parents scorned.

However his un-stored self is too jaded for wonder any more,
too rushed to consider a holy distraction.

The world for him is a mundane.

He strides by burning bushes and in his peripheral vision only sees gas logs.

He makes the goal but is losing the game.

The four-year old wunderkind is in storage and long forgotten.

Another Athens self locked away in #53 is a toddler
who once lunged out of her startled mother’s arms
into those of the drunk standing by the cash register,
the man in a ragged suit who had mugged at the little girl across the restaurant
and obnoxiously shouted and clapped patty-cake and mimed peekaboo for her,
this stubbly bearded stranger who found himself suddenly embraced
by this innocent child who laid her head on his shoulder;
such kindness he had not known in decades.

That child of God who did not judge—*did not judge*—remains in storage
while the girl grew up and learned, unconsciously (of course),
to size up everyone by gender, race, age, income, politics, religion,
education, taste, driving habits, assumed character, and team affiliation
for consideration, critique, and cataloguing.

Worst of all, she turns her evaluative eye upon herself seeing only
that she is too chubby, too mousy,
that she does not fit in the box she deems “perfect.”

Behind the door with the rusting plate labeled 12 is hidden a boy.

He’s a lanky lad, holding a shoe box of sundries he has collected on his explorations:
rocks with mica flecks, shells, a y-shaped stick, string,
twist ties, empty spice jars, a railroad spike, and such.

He loves to make things with them,
and to invent games and dream up stories.

One day he looked in the box and no longer saw possibility and play.

Embarrassed, he shoved the boy-self and his junk into the dark little room and locked the door.

Now he reports to work every day and sits behind his computer in his cubical.

He always uses a GPS to get from A to B.

He plays golf only for the exercise and always by the rules.

There are more residents of Athens Self-Storage,
 more selves who are locked away,
 humble, oyster-soft selves,
 true selves whose divine sparks still shine bright.
 I imagine they peek out the cracks in the weather stripping if they can
 and yearn to run beside the dogs going to the vet,
 or to climb in the trees in the parking lot islands,
 or dance to the Baby Boomer music piped in the grocery store.
 I wonder if they are capable of jealousy, as they hear laughter outside the storage units
 and remember getting wet in the rain—
 laughter and raindrops multiplying miraculously
 like so many loaves and fish,
 like so much abundant joy known by the five-talent and two-talent slaves
 who doubled what they had.
 If they are jealous, I bet they pitch tantrums, beating on the walls, crying out to be heard.
 Listen to them.

You and I pay top-dollar for authenticity—
 authentic Columbian coffee,
 authentic designer pocketbooks,
 and yet we bury our authentic selves.
 It is so hard to risk living a wholehearted, undivided life.
 It is so hard not to worry about our image,
 so hard to climb out of our ruts
 so hard to pay attention to desires hidden so long.
 We are afraid to be seen for who we are.
 We are afraid of being ridiculed and run over.
 We are afraid of getting it wrong.
 Like the money we hoard, our best parts we tie up and do not share.
 We miss the mystery before us at the breakfast table.
 We are drained because we are operating without our whole selves,
 having to work twice as hard.
 Jesus, we are not lazy.
 Nor wicked.
 “Prudent” puts a good face on it.
 But, truthfully, we are scared.
 We would rather be safe than sorry.
 But we know better:
 Our broker tells us no risk, no reward.
 Our fitness coach, no pain, no gain.
 Then there’s your pithy two-liner:
 “Those who want to save their life will lose it,
 and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I have an impish urge to spring the Athens Selves from their cells,
 to fling open the creaky doors,
 to watch the young Lazaruses emerge blinking,
 to let them loose on the world,
 to rip open the boxes stacked inside marked “gentle,” “trusting,” “giggly,” “untamed.”
 But my imp is outvoted by my reason.

I heard about one woman who summoned the courage to unlock her self-storage unit.
 She didn’t do it until she was empty-nested and retired, but at least she found the key.
 Inside she discovered the young adult who wanted to join the Peace Corps,
 who wanted to save the world,
 but who took the job at the bank and a walk down the aisle.
 She just got busy for 45 years and time slipped by.
 She now knew that the job of Savior was already taken
 but she could be a peacemaker and a compassion giver.
 And so she did just that—
 but with sensible shoes, not flip flops this time.
 She signed up to mentor a kid.
 She bought the girl a storybook she had loved,
 a set of paints,
 and an electric blanket because her room was always chilly in winter.
 Every week she was there.
 She paid attention.
 She listened.
 She let go of her preconceptions and her cynicism that had seeped in over the years.
 When her mentee was late to sessions she practiced forgiveness.
 She felt alive again.
 She even sang karaoke on a dare.
 She began to feel like herself.

I read an arresting sentence in a book last week.
 It said, “The soul never stops calling us back to our birthright integrity.”¹
 To what does your soul harken?
 What self have you dug a hole for?
 What dream have you abandoned,
 passion, entombed?
 birthright integrity, forgotten?
 Where are the eyes of innocence you once had,
 eyes that lack any filters and behold each person as simply another human?

“Become a child,” Jesus said.

But we grown-ups want to play it safe.
 Athens Self-Storage,
 along with Safe & Sound Mini Storage,
 Mini U Storage,
 and a half dozen more vault vendors are all too happy to oblige us.
 We are that one-talent slave,
 handed a bag with an enormous sum in it,
 a gift so precious we are terrified.
 So we make our way to 170 Security Circle and pay the price.

Mary Oliver's question haunts me:
 "Tell me," she asks.
 "What is it you will do with your one wild and precious life?"ⁱⁱ

Pray, do tell.
 Pray.
 Dear Lord, please before the master returns, deploy an angel--
 or just make it a text or tweet.
 You need only type sixteen characters: "Fear not. Just trust."

ⁱ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p. 58 quoted in Timothy Mooney, *Like a Child: Restoring the Awe, Wonder, Joy, and Resiliency of the Human Spirit*, (Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, VT: 2014), p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, Poem 133, "The Summer Day."