

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Brattleboro, Vermont
November 26, 2023**

**The Reverend Dr. Scott Couper
Transcribed by A.I. and ZOOM**

“I Had No Place to Worship...and You...”

Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46



Credit: "National Setting of the United Church of Christ"

Please be seated and be comfortable.

Again this week, look at your bulletin cover. In very, very small print (I don't know if you can read it.), it says, “Welcome back”. It even says, “To work”. Yes, I think it does say, “Welcome back to work after your sabbatical”. I couldn't believe I found bulletin art to go with my sermon series on a reporting back on my sabbatical.

Perhaps you think it strange that we have a ‘welcome back’ image on our bulletin when I have been back for an entire month. Yet, this is the last service in our sermon series that ‘reports’ on my sabbatical. Hence, we chose a ‘welcome back’ image for our bulletin.

If you remember the very first week I returned in November, I reported on the organization of the church’s archive. The archive was on display here on the chancel area. The second week, I reported on the month of reading that I did about Comparative Religion.

Then on the last month of my sabbatical, the third one, we focused last week on my month in El Salvador. In particular, we raised the issue of Samuel’s incarceration and hearing, the Lutheran church, our sister parish, and the difficulties that they are going through right now.

Today as we conclude this series, I am in a way looking forward *after* my sabbatical. Remember, my sabbatical was intended by all of you to be a time for me of rest, renewal, and rejuvenation. Therefore, only it only makes sense to ask: “Rest, renewal, and rejuvenation ... for what?” This is what I wish to talk about in relation to our scripture reading this morning.

The last thing I just want to say before I share the message this morning is that you perhaps have noticed that my sermons are being now preached extemporaneously.

This is the way I preached in Africa for over twenty-five years. I decided that after my sabbatical I would continue that tradition that I learned in Africa. Therefore, my sermons are not scripted anymore.

However, we have so many in our congregation who can't attend worship and who don't even have internet or computer access. What Jennifer and I (mostly Jennifer) are doing now is, we are using ZOOM, through the closed captioning system (that is, through A.I., artificial intelligence) to transcribe the morning's message. On Monday, the transcription can be proofread and still be sent out to those who aren't able to be here this morning or who don't have Wi-Fi or a computer.

Let us pray to God.

We give you thanks for your Word. We pray that we have heard it. We pray that it soaks into us. Grant through the Holy Spirit, that the Word may be interpreted in a new and refreshing way. Amen.

Remember last week, the Scripture reading had a very eschatological theme to it. That is, it dealt, sort of, with the end times, with heaven and hell. We read the scripture about the ten bridesmaids or the ten virgins. Some were faithful and others perhaps were not.

Mark and I interpreted that scripture emphasized that we are to take the light of Christ, *and we are to keep it lit*. We are to bring the light out into the world. We are to expose the light of Christ to the darkness. I liked the interpretation that Mark and I had last week. Mark and I did not emphasize the traditional eschatological interpretation of the scripture.

Last week at First Congregational Church, UCC of West Brattleboro, we celebrated an installation service for The Reverend Jeremy Kirk. We heard the parable of the Ten Talents. Again, this reading is very much an eschatological scripture describing those who did well and those who did not.

There were dire, frightening, consequences for those who did not do well. Matt Deen preached a beautiful and brilliant sermon

about how the servant who *buried* his talent was actually the hero of the story and not the others who invested the talents. Matt Deen did not emphasize a 'heaven and hell' interpretation.

Our scripture reading this morning is similar to those of the two previous weeks. There is again strong eschatological element: the separation of the sheep and the goats. Some go to 'H.E. double hockey sticks' and the others go to heaven. That is the traditional, orthodox, interpretation of this reading.

Yet, this morning I would like to interpret this scripture reading differently, perhaps in a way that that you have not heard before.

First of all, I would just like to say that my time of sabbatical (indeed, this entire month when I have reflected upon my sabbatical with you), has been a time of great appreciation and thanksgiving. I have seen, not just through the years, but through the decades, how faithful this church has been!

And with you now for over five years, I continue to be in awe of the dedication of time, talents, and treasure that so many faithful in this church give.

If we look at the scripture that Sue read for us from Matthew, Jesus said, "for I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat." Downstairs, we host Loaves & Fishes which feeds this community. Volunteers work throughout the week to ensure that the most vulnerable and marginalized in our community have something to eat. We fed, even through COVID, with our partners at St. Michael's Episcopal Church. Jesus said, "For I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink". Again, Loaves & Fishes has been dedicated and diligent.

Jesus said, "For I was a stranger, and you welcomed me". For a year under Gabby Martin's leadership and through the time of so many of our members, we hosted a family from Afghanistan and

got them on their feet. We enabled them and their children to have a wonderful, bright, and brilliant start in our country. I think we did about as well as a church possibly ever could.

Jesus said, “For I was naked, and you gave me clothes”. Downstairs, we host Carry Me Home, again in partnership with our Episcopalian brothers and sisters. Every week, I bring someone who comes to our door downstairs to find winter boots and winter coats.

Jesus said, “For I was sick and you comforted me”. All of you, through your pledges, tithes, and offerings, make it possible for me to go visit when people are admitted to Pine Heights and Brattleboro Memorial Hospital. Because of you, I am able to visit people's homes after they have undergone dialysis and when they're struggling with chemotherapy treatments. As a church, we visit those who are sick and we pray with and for them.

Jesus said, “For when I was in prison, you visited me”. We cannot go into these mass incarceration facilities in El Salvador. Yet, we can support the Cristo Redentor church. We can support Samuel and his wife and his two children. We can support Samuel with money for food while he is in prison. We can and should pray that he is released.

And this is when you know our church goes above and beyond: We interpret this scripture so that last year *we added to it*. Said almost in jest, but actually it was quite serious, we added on to the scripture, and we said, **“When I needed to go to the bathroom, you gave me a place to go”**. Our church is celebrated in this community because we have hosted in partnership with Groundworks Collaborative a porta-potty on Main Street for the public. Our porta-potty is the only public facility that exists until you go all the way up onto Canal Street at Foodworks. “When I needed to go to the bathroom, you gave me

a place to go”. That is, I think, a healthy interpretive addition to our scripture.

As we look forward into the future, I also have an interpretation to propose to you that our church is already faithfully carrying-out.

“When I didn't have a place to worship, you welcomed me and gave me a place to worship”. The Muslim community came to Brattleboro and we saw a need, we had the space, and we offered to the Muslim community a place to worship.

I ask all of you to read the letter of appreciation from Dr. Amer Latif in your *Center Bells*, December issue. The Muslim community not only formally thanks us, but they also in a report to Council have indicated that they are contributing financially to support our church. That's amazing! That the Muslim community of faith feels welcome in a Christian church to worship and then contributes to that which we are doing is rare and beautiful.

Buildings & Grounds has been working on renting-out a space in our church for the In-Sight Meditation community.

Just two weeks ago in our chapel, we hosted a ‘Sound Bath’, a healing session of sounds. I promise you it was standing room only. I could not even get in the door. I had to wait outside until the end of the service. People came from Bellows Falls, VT and from Swanzey, New Hampshire. It was wonderful.

Here at Center Church, the Brattleboro Area Jewish Community wishes to be hosted here in our space for Chanukah every year. That's wonderful. Our church has its own Menorah. So we can celebrate with the holiday with them.

I've become close with Hakusho, the Buddhist priest, and have meditated with the Zen community in their rented space.

Here at Centre Congregational Church, we also host AA and NA. Both of these fellowship have their own unique brand of spirituality, though very broad, and serve as faith communities in and of themselves.

Muslims. Jews. Buddhists. AA and NA.

And we are going to propose to Council that a Kirtan (Hindu) ministry be hosted at our church. This fellowship group wants to chant as a means toward healing. Wow! I don't know if it's going to happen, but we have an opportunity. I pray it comes to fruition.

And who else? Who else knows where all of this might lead? I can see Centre Church being a place of spirituality for many different faith communities throughout southeastern Vermont.

We recently concluded our Partners for Sacred Spaces initiative. Being an interfaith center for worship was one of the many ideas that was proposed.

One of the advices from the Vitality workshops was that we begin discussing changing our church's organigram (and thus our by-laws). Our church has a ministry, board, committee, and team structure that was really designed for six or seven hundred members. Currently, we have a little over a hundred. We need to change how we decide, organize, and 'do' things so that our church structure is more appropriate to who we are. We are thinking about changing our governance structure so that there are just three broader communities of emphasis: one working on *believing* (worship), one working on *belonging* (fellowship), and one on *becoming* (education) all that God intends. All of our leadership and participation (volunteers) should fall under one of those three emphases.

In the coming year, we will also be thinking about a new form of church administration (personnel). In many synagogues, there is an administrative role that is *full-time* and co-equal with the minister/clergy/rabbi. This role coordinates social media, administration, and the entire plant facility. Thus, we probably also need to change our payroll structure.

There are many new and exciting new changes that I believe are on the horizon for Center Congregational Church. We have been working on these ideas for four years.

It is my prayer, my hope, and to some extent, I believe it's my calling to, with you, implement that which we have been planning for four years in the next five years.

Who knows what will come next? During my next sabbatical, we will again dream of new paths!

Let me conclude by saying that by welcoming the Islamic community, the Zen Buddhist community, In-site Meditation, a Hindu Kiritan ministry, AA and NA, and by worshiping Chanukah with the Jewish community does not make us any less Christian. No. Absolutely not.

Christianity is my faith tradition, and it's always will be. And Congregationalism and the United Church of Christ, and that which they value (freedom, for one, but also inclusivity), will always be a part of who I am.

One of the things that I have learned throughout my life, living overseas and teaching Intercultural Communication, is that by being with others we better understand who we are. I am, by learning about, being in fellowship with, and welcoming people of other faiths more knowledgeable about my own faith – Christianity. It's the whole process of comparing and contrasting that inspires you to think, pray, and demonstrate faithfully.

Who is it that you say you are? A Christian! To whom do you claim to belong? Who it is that you desire to emulate? Jesus. The prophets. Our ancestors in faith at Center Congregational Church.

Friends, by being a welcoming space for other faith traditions, I firmly believe we become more faithful Christians. We are not diluted one iota.

We are not lessened. We are instead enriched. And blessed! We are able to articulate and live out our values as Christians more effectively with other faiths than by ourselves.

Friends, this is the report of my sabbatical that all of you supported with your generosity. I thank you for my three months of reflection, rest, and renewal. It's my prayer that the investment made in me will bear much fruit.

This is the Word of God, and it has been preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen"!