

EARN IT
Matthew 13:10-13

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 9, 2008, Remembrance Sunday, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia

Focus Text

Then the disciples came and asked him, ‘Why do you speak to them in parables?’ He answered, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.”

In the late 1990s, when I was serving in Iowa, I met several times with a young couple from Chicago who were planning to be married.

- The bride was from the town in which I was serving; the groom was from a small town in Illinois.
- They had each left their hometowns for Chicago, become successful in law and politics, met one another, fallen in love, and made their way to Fourth Presbyterian Church, one of the strongest churches in our denomination, a church some of you know, located within a stone’s throw from Lake Michigan on a strip that, because of its affluence, is called the “Magnificent Mile.”
- Like many members of Fourth Presbyterian, this couple had everything going for them, including a love they had found in their early thirties they knew to be the love of their life.

In the course of the conversation, I asked them what attracted them to Fourth Presbyterian. I don’t remember all they said, but I remember the man speaking of a sermon he had heard. He said the minister, John Buchanan, had once looked around at the vast Sanctuary, with its fine music and well-heeled congregation, and said: “Look at all that we have.” And then he had looked directly at the congregation and said: “Now earn it.”¹

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When Paul Stetsenko was planning this Service of Remembrance, he landed on the idea of setting it during the American Revolution. Somehow in his own planning, he was moved to include, as part of the liturgy, a slight variation on a line near the end of the movie *Saving Private Ryan*.² In the movie, as many of you remember, General George C. Marshall discovers that three of the four sons of the Ryan family have been killed within days of each other and the mother is about to receive death notices of all three on the same day. The General also learns that a fourth son, Private First Class James Francis Ryan, is missing in action somewhere in Normandy. Marshall orders that Private Ryan be found and sent home immediately.

With no clue as to the whereabouts of Private Ryan, eight soldiers set out to find him. In the process of searching for and finding Private Ryan, six are killed. The leader of the group, Captain John H. Miller, suffers fatal wounds in a bridge explosion. Private Ryan is with Miller when he dies, and hears his final words: “James,” he says. “Earn this. Earn it.”³

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Every year on the Sunday nearest Veterans Day, we remember those who have given their lives in service to our country, as we said earlier in a prayer, “those who in days past and present have held the line against darkness.” This year our remembrance is set in Revolutionary America, when citizens and soldiers and even members of the clergy felt it their God-given duty to overthrow tyranny, to take up arms in pursuit of liberty.

- As we shall say in our Litany of Remembrance: “The land of Liberty was our dream, for which we put our lives.”
- As we shall hear in our offertory: those who have come before us and fought believed that “heaven” approved of “each generous deed” they did in extending liberty.⁴

¹ “Earn It,” a sermon by John M. Buchanan, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, Illinois, October 18, 1998. Available at <http://www.fourthchurch.org/%202000/10.18.98.html>.

² *Saving Private Ryan*, directed and produced by Steven Spielberg, written by Robert Rodat, Dreamworks, 1998.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saving_Private_Ryan.

⁴ John Dickenson, *Song of Liberty*.

But remembrance involves more than recall and honor. It also involves recommitment: “We only ask you of this,” reads one of our liturgies today: “Deserve this!”

“James... earn this. Earn it.”

The truth is we have to constantly earn that which we cannot earn, deserve that which we have received as a gift. And this is a paradox; for we cannot earn what we have been given. Yet we can respond to what we have been given and take it into the future.

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“For to those who have,” Jesus say, “more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

Jesus speaks these words three times in three different settings –

- In our passage, in reference to understanding the parables as a way of understanding the secrets of the kingdom of heaven;⁵
- In Mark, with reference to not hiding our light under a bushel;⁶
- And in Matthew in reference to investing the talents we have been given.⁷

In each setting, Jesus points to the tremendous burden that falls to those who have been given much.

- “Understand what you have been given,” he says.
- “Let what you have been given shine before others.”
- “Invest what you have been given so it will grow.”

“James...earn this. Earn it.”

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These may be hard times in America to talk about earning anything.

Maggie’s daughter-in-law called her in tears Thursday. She is a graphic artist working in an advertizing firm. She was called into a room at noon Thursday, along with thirty others, and told that in tough times people cut back on advertizing first, so they were all being laid off.

As a nation, right now, we feel less like those unendingly blessed than like those who have just had our blessings vanish from beneath us. Like children lost in a grocery store, we don’t know where to turn.

But ours may also be a good time to begin to appreciate again what we have been given, to begin to understand again what has gone before us, so we can make changes in our lives, individually and corporately, that honor what we have received. Ours may be a good time to come to understand all that has gone into our deliverance so that we desire, once again, to earn it.

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Forgive me for being all over the map here, but I have many thoughts.

One is of Bruce Fenchel, a dentist in Iowa, who a decade or so ago started talking, for the first time in his life, of what he had seen as a skinny young soldier being the first in to liberate one of the first concentration camps in Nazi Germany. First in, he said he was. First to see what had really happened. Silenced by what he saw. Bruce survived the war, returned home, married, became a dentist, became a father, divorced, remarried, but all the while he never broke his silence.

For some reason, in his seventies, he began to talk. He made an appointment with me one day and said, “As my pastor, I want you to know this about me.” Then he told me what he had seen. Then he began to talk to his kids, who by now were grown scattered all over the country. Then he talked to a youth fellowship. Then a Sunday School class.

⁵ Matthew 13:10-13.

⁶ Mark 4:21-25.

⁷ Matthew 25:14-30.

His kids knew something had changed in their dad, and on his birthday they converged on him in surprise, took him to see *Saving Private Ryan*, affirmed his new found freedom of tongue.

After that he never quit talking. Rotary Clubs, Garden Clubs, Veterans Associations. He told the story of what he saw. He told the story of how evil human beings can be to one another, how cruel. And yet he told also of how blessed he was, how blessed we are, to be free, to be safe. He told how much we need to earn what we have been given. When he died a few weeks ago, his message remained: “Earn this. Earn it.”

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Maggie and I went to our polling place about 6:30 Tuesday morning. We didn’t want to vote early. We wanted to be a part of this national, communal process called Election Day. We expected the lines to be long and they were long. Several hundred people ahead of us. Our poll worker said that when he arrived at 4:30 a.m., forty people were waiting.

It was cool, and misty, and silent. Nearly everyone in line ahead of us was younger than us. Several races and nations represented. Parents with infants strapped to their chest, holding the hands of their older children as well. Young professionals reading journals, listening to I-Pods.

As I stood in line, I knew it likely that for the first time in our history we were going to elect someone who generations ago it would have been inconceivable to elect as President of the United States. And as I looked at the people standing in line, in silence, I began to weep, in silence, at just how peaceful it all was, at how peaceful this one act of historical change would be.

It was as if – in this one brief moment – we had begun as a nation to earn all that for which those who have gone before us have fought and died, bled and marched, spoken, preached, taught, editorialized, legislated. A Hawaiian/Kenyan/African American as President, as leader of the free world.

Had we finally begun to live into that for which others – including his honorable opponent – had sought, suffered, and in many cases, died?

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To whom much is given....

- The lamp
- The talents
- The secrets of the kingdom of heaven

much is expected.

What do you need to be doing in your life
to earn all you have been given?

What do you need to be doing in Westminster Church
to deserve what you have received here?

- Lend your voice to the choir
- Lend your hands and heart to Meals on Wheels, bag lunch, tutoring, Carpenter’s Shelter

What do you need to be doing in this nation
to earn the tremendous blessing we have as Americans?

“James...earn this. Earn it.”

Amen.