

“The un-borrowed life”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 25:1-13

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Some kids have imaginary friends. I had imaginary lives. I’m not just talking about playing pirates or cowboys; I’m talking about fully developed master lies.

When I was in the sixth grade, I convinced my classmates that I was a professional, prodigy skier. Every Monday I regaled them with intricate stories of the international skiing competitions I had won over the weekend. I was so committed to this story that I faked a limp for an entire month because of a “skiing accident.” Do you realize the kind of dedication it takes to fake a limp every day, going up stairs, walking down hallways? I had kids carrying my books for me!

Oh, and it doesn’t stop there. I convinced all the younger kids in my neighborhood that I had super powers. I will never forget the moment when we entered “battle” with other kids in the neighborhood, and a girl shouts, “Patrick! Run! Use your super speed!” She may have been disappointed with the results.

I also told them that I was a general in the US military, charged with secret missions. I was authorized to include them on these missions... *if* they passed certain rigorous physical and mental tests. Once, I told them that there was buried treasure in my backyard; I sat in a chair, as they dug up my yard in search of a chest of coins I had painted gold and buried.

The point of this story is not that you may have hired a lying, power-hungry psycho as your pastor (though that could be true). The point also isn’t that there’s anything wrong with children using their imagination. It is one of life’s greatest wonders that we can enter infinite worlds through our mind. The point is that I did it all because I was convinced that, if I was just me, not a general, not a super hero, not an award-winning athlete, just me, they wouldn’t like me.

What I didn’t know was that while I was so busy borrowing other people’s lives, I was neglecting my own: the relationships I postponed; the dreams I deferred; the voice I kept silent; the gifts I squandered.

It is the tragedy of modern life—that we now reside in the freest age of humankind, have more tools than ever to know ourselves and live true, and yet... and yet... we are lost. We do not know ourselves. We do not want to.

With so many voices, so many ads, telling us that what someone else has is better, we become a people of borrowed lives, borrowed ideas, borrowed faith. We seek out the book, the blog, the friend or lover, the diet or gadget, the church that will finally solve our problems. We parrot Fox or MSNBC. We mimic the lives of others seemingly happier than ours, cobbling together half-truths on Instagram and Facebook, not realizing they themselves are merely a copy of a copy.

We hide beneath the anesthetizing ether of momentary satisfactions, passing entertainments, fleeting distractions, the new series on Netflix, the vacation we just have to take, the crowd we just have to be a part of, anything to ensure we are never left alone to face our life. A life that grows dimmer by the hour. The faith life deferred to our spouse. The discipleship deferred to the 20 percent active in the church. The relationship that needs healing deferred to a later hour that never comes. The bad habit we keep promising to break, the moral stand we keep promising to make. Deferred. Delegated. Lost.

A whole life of moments wasted, letting others live, others serve, others worship, others speak, others think, others lead, with the hope that we can borrow their lives later.

This is the story Jesus teaches us today. It's the story of a wedding and bridesmaids who hoped they could borrow the work of others. Ten bridesmaids have gathered at the house where the wedding feast will take place. They wait on the bride and groom as they make their way through the village, receiving the well wishes of everyone they pass. No one knows exactly when they will arrive, but it will be late into the night, so the bridesmaids come with lamps. Each has a lamp of their own; that's not the problem. All sleep; that's not the problem.

The problem is that only five bring their own oil. The other five do nothing to keep their lamps lit, and when their lamps go out, they try to borrow the oil of the first five.

In Matthew, light symbolizes the faithful life we offer in response to God's grace. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works" (Matt. 5:14-16). He says, "The righteous will shine like the sun" (13:43).

These five bridesmaids think they can rely on another's oil, another's righteousness, another's life, but when the bridegroom—Christ—comes, their lamps have gone out; they are too late; the door is shut. Christ says, "I do not know you."

Christ tells this story because he has an urgent warning for us. He "warns us that there are certain things that cannot be borrowed... We cannot borrow a relationship with God" (William Barclay).

The bridesmaids are shut out, but Jesus tells this story so we won't be. With this story, Jesus gives us another chance.

He gives us another chance to find our oil, to light our lamps, to live this unique and precious life God created in us. A chance to become the vessel of light and wonder we never knew we were.

In this dark and scary story there is an invitation, a radical affirmation, of life undeterred.

The bridegroom doesn't say, "I do not know you," because he is callous. He says, "I do not know you," because he cannot see them; they've let their lamps go out, it is dark, and there are robbers about, thieves and borrowers. The only way he can know them is if their light is shining. The only way he can know them is if they are living the life God made for them.

Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, “There is a time in every [person]’s education when he [or she] arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide.”

For if I do not live this life, what life is there for God to save? If I do not use the gifts God has placed within me, if I do not speak when God calls me to, if I am not myself, how will God know me?

There are no surrogates on this Lenten journey. We walk with Jesus to the cross, and to God; no one can do it for us. So this Lent, instead of giving up something, I want you to find something—something long buried and forgotten. I want you to find the un-borrowed life, authentic and original to whom God made you. I want you to let your light shine, your righteousness and faith, your inquisitiveness and ideas, your cross and resurrection. Let it shine so bright, so bright, till you, and all others, and God herself, knows you.

Because there is only one life worth living, my friends, and it is yours. You are amazing, and through you God can wield a light so bright that it can overturn any and every darkness. You don’t need to be a general. You don’t need to be a super hero. You don’t need to be a star athlete. You don’t need to be anyone but yourself.

This past Monday, I saw that light shine as members of Westminster Church became family to a man who has no family. He in turn blessed us with a smile, and a story, that shined the light of God on our small lives.

That morning six of us helped an older man with disabilities, who was living alone, isolated, in a condemned house with exposed wires and rat droppings, move to a safe and loving senior living center. He couldn't afford a mover, and had no family, no one, to help him. We didn't know this man; until that day he was a stranger; now, he is a friend. Monday, I saw people with their own health challenges and busy schedules set all that aside to pack his belongings, load them into trucks, and bring them to his new home.

It would have been so easy to say, “Let someone else do it.” But these disciples showed up, oiled their lamps, and let them shine. They lived. And because they lived, because the light shined upon their faces, they will find the door to life open.

So the next time you read this parable, let the first thing you hear not be judgment but a clarion call to live your life now, practice your faith now, speak and lead and dance now. Be the light God made you to be. Because remember: God can only save your life if there’s a life to save.

Amen.