A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

“*On Twenty-five Years: Let Us Begin Again*”

Mark 10:17-22

October 14, 2018

DaySpring, 25 years! Congratulations. You’ve been a church for a quarter century. This week, in 1993, on the second Sunday in October, seven families met together as a church. They’d been heading toward that day for a while: planning, praying, talking together as friends about what it would actually mean to be a church. Nothing happens in a vacuum, and DaySpring’s first day as a church didn’t appear out of thin air. It was rooted in friendship, forged by intense discussion, some heated debate, a lot of laughter, many moments of amazement, and given life by a shared need for a worshipping community to be spiritually renewing for the mission of God’s people in the world. We inherit and continue the conviction and commitment of those founding families by whom this church was brought to life.

It would be completely appropriate for our gospel reading to be the parable of the talents. I can see now how it would go. I could read the story about the servants who were each given talents, five, three, and one. The master left for a journey. After a long period of time, he returned. Twenty-five years I would say, and you would know what I was getting at. Then I would say, “Today we give an accounting of what we have done with what God has given us.” And then I would say, and you would know this is coming, “The master looks at us and says to us, ‘Well done, good and faithful servants. You have been faithful over a little. Now I will set you over much. Come, receive your reward. Enter the joy of your master.’”

That would be a great gospel reading for today. And I could preach a great sermon on that story. It seems totally unfair that that is not the gospel reading for today. And it seems even more unfair that the gospel reading for today is the story of the rich young ruler. I thought about turning to the parable of the talents anyway. Take that, lectionary. You can’t control me. But I kept coming back to the text that was actually assigned for today. I couldn’t shake the sense that there’s deep wisdom here for us; there’s a word here for us.

Truly, the drama of the two stories begin in a similar way as a person presents to the Lord all that he or she has done, hoping for approval.

What do we lay before the Lord, hoping for approval? Our story, I think. See Lord, look at our story. We have kept the faith from our youth.

I’ve always thought the story of DaySpring was worth telling and remembering. Where were you in October, 1993? I don’t think a single person here today was here that day. A lot of you weren’t born yet and wouldn’t be until long after October, 1993. I was a junior in college down the road a piece from here, still trying to make sense of the summer I had just spent as a summer missionary in Brasov, Romania and what to do with the growing sense I had that I was being called to be a pastor. Where were you?

I wonder if any of us were doing anything as courageous as starting a church from scratch. As you know, It takes a bit of planning for a group of people to come together for a get-together. It takes more commitment for a group of people to come together purposefully every week. It takes a huge leap forward for a group to come together, without a pastor, without a building of their own, and call themselves a church. That is a leap of faith, and they did it. And then they did the things you’re supposed to do institutionally to be a church: made some bylaws that would guide decision-making, asked a few among them to take leadership as a coordinating council. They did the things you need to do to be able to cash checks and pay rent to the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and pay a bit to the different preachers they had visit each Sunday morning. You know what happens when you start to do all that? You start to look like a church. And then someone you don’t know will visit. And that someone will say I’d like to be part of this. I’d like to join this group. And then as soon as that happens, you’re on the hook. You can’t back out of it. You’re in. You’re all in. And nothing less than that is what it took. Being all in. That moment, when that happened for the first time, when someone said, I’d like to join this church. That moment was a terrifying moment. It meant this was real. They couldn’t just stop if they got tired. Someone else’s life was now intertwined with theirs. Interesting, isn’t it, how the presence of a stranger is what reveals who you really are. They were a church.

DaySpring didn’t have a building, a pastor, or a strategic plan. Like their name, DaySpring—the sunrise—they emerged over the horizon, shining warm light of hope. And other people came. First one and then others came. It wasn’t long before they met a young preacher that had a gift for putting their best, unformed prayers into words. They asked him to be their pastor and he said yes, I’d like that. For twelve years, Burt and DaySpring grew up together. Others came. Some of them brought children with them, and that was new. In the beginning, there wasn’t the patter of children’s feet or the cry of babies’ voices. There was no children’s minister because there was no children’s ministry because there were no children. Then they came. Some of those children grew into youth. Before then, there was no youth minister because there was no youth ministry, because there just weren’t many young people. But they came. They came for a people and their pastor who seemed committed to church as a community of worship and who embodied their mission: Sacred and Simple. Mostly, they came needing God. They could sense in some mysterious way, among these people somehow, that God was near and they could tell they were loved.

Along the way, after about five years, what began to stir in them all was a sense that they were ready to have a place of their own. A few years later, by divine providence and unusual foresight, this rolling wooded piece of central Texas eden became theirs. The growing number of DaySpring community members could be found right out here on any given Saturday morning clearing rocks and tree stumps and dreaming of a sanctuary among the oak trees. In 2003, ten years after the first group met the first time, they worshipped God in this sanctuary. A lot of you were here then.

Since then, in the last 15 years, DaySpring has seen a number of changes. Even as a great preacher gave way to a fair-to-middling one, the congregation continued to grow. It was never about the preacher. There’s more babies here today than all who were present on the first day of DaySpring’s life. There’s more youth here today than were here in the first ten years of the church. The sanctuary front wall was pulled down and pushed out to make hospitable room for more to come. Stakes in the ground out in the field suggest that at some point we may be making more decisions about the next season of this campus’ development. We’ve learned to know one another across generations and we’ve seen one another across sharp differences. We’ve sent mission teams to Romania, El Salvador, Honduras, Houston after the hurricane, and to the Texas border to bring a bit of relief to suffering people. We’ve sent out pastors and missionaries all over this country and the world. We’ve buried a few of our friends. We’ve prayed in silence, extinguished candles, married our young, buried our old, washed feet, baptized in a cow trough, broken bread and sung *Our Father* on Easter morning around Kurt’s piano.

All the way through, echoing the monastics, we’ve said our work is our prayer and our prayer is our work. And we’ve meant it, most of the time. The work we’ve done together has been a kind of prayer. And here we are, 25 years old.

Only by God’s grace have we come to this day. Nothing was fated; nothing was absolute; nothing was inevitable. There was nothing certain that DaySpring would come to life with an extremely diverse group of people, but it did, or that it would ever attract anyone to visit, but it did. Or that the finances would work out, but they have, or that land like this would be found and acquired, but it was. DaySpring could have been in a strip mall somewhere. How different would our history have been? Or that DaySpring would find a pastor like Burt whose spirit so richly wove with theirs, but they did. Or that Katy Stokes would say, “I like singing in the choir, but I’ve never gotten to sit with my family in worship. Can we just not have a choir loft?” And so we don’t. Or that someone would say, “We can’t afford stain glass windows,” and that someone else would say, “Good. Look at these surroundings. Don’t we think God is revealed through the creation? Let us join creation in praise.” And so we have windows. Or that a line on the first DaySpring chart would read Play Piano, and no one signed up, so someone said, “Kurt, you do it.” And he said, “OK I’ll try,” and well, he got pretty good. See what can happen when you sign up on the Chart?

And so for the one who secured the first reservation at the Seventh Day Adventist Church and paid the first month’s rent with money sacrificially given by just a few families, thanks be to God.

For the gift of simplicity, the willingness to say no to what might diminish our worship, for the chart and all of those who have given their time and work for this community, all of those who have come before and those who will come, thanks be to God.

For the music, and the moments of transcendence, for tears and consolations, and a Spirit that lifts us up, thanks be to God.

For stones and windows, darkness and light, for the majestic oak trees, and St. Francis who keeps vigil, for a half bridge and a water tower, and adventures for children, thanks be to God.

For a youth room and a children’s building, for nurseries and a chapel, for a fireplace in the pastor’s office, for all the meals shared in the narthex, for the liturgical seasons and the artistic, creative expressions of worship through each season, thanks be to God.

For the gospel witness through the work of this people, for their leadership in the community, their quiet service, for someone cleaning on a Thursday afternoon, someone else mowing on Saturday morning, someone on Saturday evening preparing to lead children the next morning, for their ministry here and for those around the world, thanks be to God.

Thanks be to God, indeed.

DaySpring, 25 years, you are still young, you are enriched beyond measure, you are a truly special church. You have been faithful from your youth until today.

You only lack one thing. *Sell it all, give it away, and follow Jesus.*

Few people in history have taken on Jesus’ message to the young man literally as a command for their own lives. Though some have. The story of the rich young ruler was instrumental in the life of Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone of Assisi, who saw in the rich young ruler a mirror of his own life. Hearing Jesus’ call set Francis free. He sold everything he owned and followed Jesus the rest of his life, with a wholehearted commitment to the beauty of poverty and the love of God and became St. Francis. While few have taken Jesus’ instruction literally for their own lives, everyone must take seriously the shock that it gave to the young man, the disciples, and everyone who heard it. And everyone must consider fresh what it means to follow Jesus.

As much as I appreciate the witness of St. Francis, I don’t know that we’re being called to sell the church property and start over with nothing, but I do think the spirit of the thing is a high anniversary calling. This has been so good. And yet**,** we are to hold all of this lightly, lest we amass such a burden and such a grip on it, that this congregational camel could never thread the eye of a needle.

From the beginning, DaySpring folks felt and foresaw the constant need for Christians to renew their intimacy with God, born of dependence on the Lord, not earned by our busyness and accomplishments. We are not the buildings. We are not the programs or the administration. We are not the bylaws. At heart, we are still just a community rooted in friendship, forged by intense discussion, some heated debate, a lot of laughter, many moments of amazement, and living with a shared need for a worshipping community to be spiritually renewing for the mission of God’s people in the world. You and I inherit and continue the conviction and commitment of the founders who brought this church to life.

So I think this; this is what I’m hearing this week: Start over. Go back. Let go of everything you think is vital, everything you think you can’t live without, everything you’ve built your pride on, built your identity on, everything that’s not of God. Let it go. Run to who you were, to your first love. Run to who you were, because it’s who you’ve always been, and who you still are in your truest self: sacred . . .simple.

At the end of his life, about 25 years after he began, Francis would say to his followers, “Let us begin again, for up until now, we have done little or nothing.” To some that may sound discouraging, but Francis didn’t mean it that way and they didn’t hear it that way. In truth, the Franciscan movement had outgrown Francis’ wildest imagination; he had so many followers he hardly knew what to do with them. They went out preaching the good news to all the world as far as their feet could carry them. In the basilica where Francis is buried, there is a famous Giotto painting of Francis holding up the toppling church. God had called him from the beginning “rebuild my church” and by God’s grace, it was happening. If Francis wasn’t so in love with God, he could’ve been prideful, but he never pointed to himself and what he had done and what he had accomplished. He pointed to God in everything, even when he said, “Let us begin again, for up until now, we have done nothing or little.”

What he meant was that history is not linear; it’s cyclical, like the seasons of the year. We begin again with the kind of spirit of wonder, of courage, of commitment, of joy . . .all that the rich young ruler turned his back on when he went away sad because this was asking too much of him. He thought he’d done a lot and wanted some credit for it, so he turned away from Christ, who in the 21st chapter of Revelation tells us with a power that fills us with confidence and unshakable hope, “Behold, I make all things new.”

Church, after 25 years, can we also begin again? Yes, of course. Each Sunday is new beginning around here. It’s called Renewal Way for a reason.

Can we hear Jesus’ words as an invitation to disorientation for a richly blessed young church? Let us be renewed in the spirit of freedom and lightness that was born years ago right here among us. Let us hold this place lightly, hold it up to the light, and be light on our feet. Let us do nothing that would diminish our worship, let us do everything that would draw us into the life of the Word of God and welcome those who would come with us on this journey in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and would enable each of us to do what we are all called to do.

And let this word be said again in 25 years, if not every year, if not every morning the Dayspring dawns, “Brothers and sisters, let us begin again, for up until now we have done little or nothing.” Amen.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2018