Well, we made it! The final Sunday of our “No Time For Rest” stewardship campaign is here – and so are you! It’s been a lightning four weeks. There have been many people hard at work on this effort, but none more so than Pete Ruthenburg, who I want to single out for particular thanks. This is Pete’s second campaign and he knows how it needs to be done and how to keep me on my toes and gives of his time so freely that I wonder if he has gotten any sleep in the past month. But, to you Pete, my thanks and the thanks of this congregation.

Along the way, over this past four weeks, we’ve been talking about where we think God is calling this congregation to go over the next 18-months. In our first sermon, we talked about how easy it would be for us – both as a city and as a congregation – to simply sit back and rest on our laurels. But the gospel imperative asks us the question, “who dares stand idle?” In the second sermon, we talked about “redeeming the time” – that is, making the most of the time in which we find ourselves and, in particular, in the city in which we find ourselves. Located between two of the most exciting neighborhoods in Evansville, we find ourselves in the enviable position of having good news to share. In last week’s sermon, we were reminded that there is “no arm so weak but may do service here.” We all have a part to play in this next stage of our ministry. We each have gifts – financial, spiritual, musical, occupational – that can be used in the noble and God-given work of sharing good news and expanding the borders of God’s kingdom on earth.
All of those sermons – and our entire stewardship campaign – is built on the words of a hymn by Jane Laurie Borthwick. We’ve been singing each of the verses on each of our Sundays and today we’ll sing the whole hymn as we close our worship. But today’s verse says this:

Come, labor on. No time for rest, till glows the western sky.
Till the long shadows o’er our pathway lie.
And a glad sound comes with the setting sun, “Well done, well done!”

We’ve made the turn and we’re in the home-stretch, coming down to the wire. There’s “no time for rest.”

The parable from Matthew’s gospel, which serves as the hub of our worship this morning, is called by Eduard Schweitzer, “The Parable of Responsibility.” Jesus tells the story of a wealthy man who is going away for a while, and calls his servants together and entrusts each of them with a portion of his estate. To one he gives a great deal, to the next a little less, and to the last servant he gives one coin. The one who had been entrusted with much did very well and when his Master returned, he was able to present him with double the amount with which he had been entrusted. “Well done,” said the Master. The second servant came forward and presented a 100% increase to his Master, to which his Master responded, “Well done.” All of this leaves us wondering who the broker was that served those two and whether or not that firm is still in business. A 100% return ain’t bad!

But then comes the servant who had been entrusted with one coin. In his Master’s absence, the servant took that single coin and buried it in an old mayonnaise jar in the back yard. And when his Master returned, we went, dug up the coin, and brought it to his Master. His Master was not pleased, for out of fear for his Master, the servant had done nothing with what had been entrusted to him.

And that’s probably where the original parable ended. It says everything that needs to be said. But with the proclivity in some Christian circles to always have someone who needs to be condemned, the parable in Matthew ends with the servant being flung into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Still, when you look at where this parable is positioned in the gospel, the picture begins to come into focus. Right before our story for the morning, we have the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids. They do not know when the Bridegroom will arrive. Some were ready. Some were not.

Right after our story for the morning comes the parable of the great judgment, where the nations are separated as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Some are welcomed into the kingdom of God because they used their gifts for the benefit of those who were in need. Some were closed out of the kingdom of God because they failed to use their gifts for the benefit of those in need.
Are you getting it? These three stories – each in their own way – are reminding us of our responsibility as Christian people. In this life, each disciple of Jesus must act on their own responsibility and initiative. We cannot be side-tracked by what we perceive as our own personal security needs. We cannot be preoccupied with vindicating our personal righteousness, doing our best to convince everyone of our own goodness, while failing to be devoted to God, which means being devoted to other people and taking active and sometimes risky steps to help them. Jesus is telling us that a religion that is concerned only with not doing anything wrong in order that we may one day stand vindicated, ignores the will of God.

When we fail to do our very best with what God has entrusted to us, we shirk our responsibility to God. When we sit on our gifts – whatever they may be – and keep them for a “rainy day,” we fail to show the trust we are to have in God. When we obsess about what others have, or about whether or not we have the latest gizmo or gadget, or worry about whether or not we’ll be able to live better than previous generations, and fail to care for our neighbors who are poor, or sick, or who suffer injustice, or who live in sub-standard housing, or can’t earn enough to support themselves and their families – we have failed to live as God has called us to live.

The late Dr. Fred Craddock, one of the best preachers of the last century, had a story he liked to tell of a nine-pound sparrow. The sparrow was walking down Dr. Craddock’s street and Dr. Craddock hollered out to the bird, “Aren’t you a little heavy?” The sparrow said, “Yes, that’s why I’m walking, trying to get some of this weight off.” Craddock said, “Why don’t you fly?” He said the sparrow looked at him like he was stupid and said, “Fly? I’ve never flown in my life. I might get hurt!” Craddock said to the sparrow, “What’s your name?” And the sparrow said, “Church.”

Are we afraid to fly? Are we afraid to answer the call that God has placed on our lives and on the life of this congregation? Are we intimidated by the needs and hardship and adversity that faces faithful congregations in these difficult days?

At one of our small group meetings, a member of the congregation asked a great question. After talking about where we’ve come from and where we believe God is calling us to go, and after recalling the success of the last stewardship campaign and the remarkable increase in giving, the question came to Pete and me: “When does this stop, or are we always going to be increasing?” That’s a fantastic question and it’s been with me since I heard it.

When do we get to stop? When every person has enough to eat. When every person has clean water to drink. When every person who is a stranger is welcomed. When every person who is naked is clothed. When every person who is sick is cared for. When every prisoner is visited and valued as a human being. When justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. When the garden planet of God’s creation looks like it did on the day God called it “good.” When all of those challenges are accomplished, we will entertain a motion to adjourn.
Until then, there’s “no time for rest.” God has work for us to do, right here in River City and around the world. God needs us, right here in the heart of Evansville, and God needs us to quite possibly to be the “heart” of Evansville. God needs us to connect with our neighborhoods – both well-to-do and deep-in-need, and offer help and hope and a caring hand. God needs us to let people from every background, every walk of life, every political bent, and every label we wear as an identifier – God needs us to let them know that God cares, that God loves, and that God is present.

And, if we do that – and we can – then, when the “long shadows o’er our pathway lie” we will hear a voice speak the greatest words to us that we will ever hear. We will hear God say, “well done…well done!” There’s “no time for rest.” Not now and not until God opens the door to forevermore. Amen.