

Sunday, August 18, 2019  
Rev. Jessica Paulsen  
FPC, Corning  
Psalm 90:1-12  
Matthew 25:14-30

### The Parable of the Talents

Talent. What's a talent? In beginning to look at this passage, that's perhaps the first thing we need to understand—exactly what is it that we're talking about when we say talent? A talent, at this time, was “a unit of money approximating fifteen years of earnings by a day laborer. Thus each of the gifts is enormous; to be entrusted with five talents was to be entrusted with more than a lifetime's worth of average wages: an amount equivalent to seventy-five years of earnings by a day laborer” (Lindsay Armstrong, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 4*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY. 2011. 309, 311). So, a talent is a unit of money. And not just a small amount of money either, but more than probably any of these 3 slaves could have imagined or dreamed about.

Because the focus of this passage is on what the slaves do with the talent(s) they've been given, this passage is often used to look at and discuss stewardship—both monetary stewardship and stewardship of our other gifts. But that interpretation, that way of reading the text, does not take into account the rest of the context of this passage. It does not examine why Matthew placed this passage at this point in his gospel or what's being talked about before and after this parable.

Let's take a moment and look at that. First, Jesus is telling this story, this parable, during the last days of his life. He has already entered Jerusalem to prepare for the feast of the Passover and since that moment has been teaching and telling parables about what is to come, which is what we see in the parables that surround this one—the ten bridesmaids, the judgment of the nations, and so on. In that context, then, we begin to understand that this parable, instead of

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being mainly about stewardship, is more about the end of time and how we live between now and then. So, instead of focusing on the passage through the lens of stewardship, we focus on it through the lens of the end times.

At first glance, it might seem to be about what we're able to accomplish over that time. People often applaud the first two slaves for all they accomplished—they doubled what they'd been given and judge the third slave for not doing anything with what he was given. But consider the words of John Buchanan writes about the third slave,

[The third slave] digs a hole in the ground and puts all the money in the hole for safekeeping. In a time of stock-market decline, this man looks very wise. This is not a bad man. This is a prudent, careful, cautious investor. He is not about to take chances with the money. It is all there, every penny of it, when his master returns. He is proud of himself. "Here it is. All of it, safe and sound." For his efforts he is treated as harshly as anyone in the whole Bible. (Ibid. 310)

What we see in this is that the point was never about the money to begin with. In parables we must look deeper than the surface meaning we first see, and the point of this parable is about living. It's about investing in life. "It's about taking risks. It is about Jesus himself and what he has done and what is about to happen to him. Mostly it is about what he hopes and expects of [the disciples] after he is gone. It is about being a follower of Jesus and what it means to be faithful to him, and so, finally, it is about you and me" (Ibid.)

It's about how we live our lives—between the time when Jesus left (the master leaves) to the time when he finally returns. It's about what we're willing to risk for Jesus, how we're willing to use or not use what we've been given. As Buchanan goes on to say:

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The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently...It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the sin of respectable people is running from responsibility. (Ibid., 310)

Which is what we often do, isn't it? It's what we see all around us, isn't it?

It's not my responsibility that you're hurting. It's not my fault or responsibility that you're living in poverty, or going hungry, or unemployed. It's not my responsibility that children are being separated from their parents, that our habits and ways of living are destroying the earth we live on and are keeping people in slavery. I don't want to get hurt, or lose everything I have, and so I'm going to focus on keeping exactly what I have, and not claim responsibility for anything or anyone else.

Yet what this parable shows us is that as Jesus invites us to follow him, he is also inviting us

to live our lives as fully as possible by investing them, by risking, by expanding the horizons of our responsibilities. [Being a disciple of Jesus] is not so much believing ideas about him as it is following him. It is to experience renewed responsibility for the use and investment of these precious lives of ours. It is to be bold and brave, to reach high and care deeply. So, the parable is the invitation to the adventure of faith: the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ. (Ibid., 312)

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And it is a high-risk venture. There are no guarantees of a good return on our investment. But God has never called us to a life of guarantees or security. God has always and only called us to be faithful, to resist fear, and to behave and live in ways that demonstrate our trust and faith in God.

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