

MAKE IT GROW!

(11/18/18)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 25:14-30

“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:21)

The scripture lesson for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew is known as the Parable of the Talents. A slightly different variation of this parable is contained in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke’s gospel, the Aramaic word that Jesus originally used for that which was entrusted to the servants was translated into the English word “pound.” A pound was the equivalent of three months wages for a laborer. The word that Matthew used is translated by the word “talent.” A talent was worth more than fifteen years’ wages of a laborer.

I prefer the translation presented in Matthew for two reasons. First, the talent is far more valuable than the pound. It gives us a more accurate picture of what God has given to us, what God has entrusted to us. As we enter into the Thanksgiving season, a time when we reflect on our blessings, a time when we reflect on the source of our blessings, the talent is a more accurate symbol of God’s abundant gifts than the pound.

Second, Jesus was not just talking about our stewardship of money, Matthew’s translation encourages us to think in a broader sense of the talents that God has given to us, that God has entrusted to us, that God wants us to use in the creation of a new world. Jesus reminds us of the source of these talents. He tells us how we can nurture them. He emphasizes the importance of sharing our gifts and talents. It is through the sharing of these talents that they grow.

In the Parable of the Talents, as recorded in Matthew, the master is going on a journey. He summons his servants and entrusts his property to them. Note that he does not give to each of them equally; he gives “to each according to his ability.” Then he leaves on his journey.

If the master in the parable is God, and if we are the servants, how are we to understand Jesus’ suggestion that the master is going away on a journey? It implies that there will be a time, a period of time when the master is not present, is not actively overseeing his domain. During this time, the servants will function on his behalf.

This makes the servants more than servants; it makes them stewards. A steward is one to whom something has been entrusted. A person cannot be a steward over what he or she owns,

but only over that which belongs to someone else. In a biblical sense, God is the owner and we are the stewards. God entrusts us with the responsibility of being stewards of God's creation.

God calls us to stewardship. God calls us to faithful stewardship of our bodies and our minds. We need to remember that they do not belong to us, that they are not ours to do with as we wish. God calls us to faithful stewardship of our relationships. We need to remember that the other person in the relationship is also God's child. God calls us to faithful stewardship of our wealth, of our possessions. With this comes the reminder that what we have does not belong to us. God calls us to faithful stewardship of our gifts and talents, that which we have been given to share with others.

Jesus tells us that the master is going away on a journey. This metaphor stands in contrast with our belief, articulated so eloquently in the 139th psalm, that we can never be separated from God, that God is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. However, if we look at the way God is depicted in the Old Testament compared to the way God is depicted in the New Testament, we will notice a significant difference. In the Old Testament, God is omnipresent. God walks in the Garden with Adam and Eve. God talks with Noah and Abraham. God plays a major role in the Exodus from Egypt and holds conversations with Moses. God speaks directly to the prophets and speaks through the prophets to his people.

In the New Testament, we find much less evidence of God's direct presence. Other than a brief announcement at the time of Jesus' baptism, God has little direct communication with people. God apparently speaks to Jesus, especially through prayer. However, in the latter part of the Old Testament and much more noticeably in the New Testament, God is conspicuously absent.

I think that this is the way many of us experience God. We don't hear voices thundering down from the sky or encounter bushes that burn and are not consumed. We don't hear God's voice telling us to build an ark, free his people from slavery, or sacrifice our first born on a mountaintop. Though, of course, some of us do. Some of us have such a close personal relationship with God that we do actually hear or experience God speaking to us in very specific ways. All I am saying is that not everyone has this kind of religious experience

As Christians, we are able to hear and experience God's voice in scripture. We believe God speaks to each of us and to the world through the church. We may at times even hear that

still, small voice within that seeks to guide our steps. From time to time we have a sense of God's presence in worship, in prayer, and in the sacraments, especially in those moments when, as John Wesley said, "our heart is strangely warmed." But for the most part, God does not appear to be as actively present and engaged in the world as he was believed to be and as he was experienced in the time of our spiritual mothers and fathers.

In the process of slowly and deliberately withdrawing from an active engagement with the world, God increasingly entrusted human beings with his message. God not only selected certain people to speak on his behalf; God was present in these people. God was present to the world in Jesus and through Jesus, in and through the disciples and the apostles. God has been present throughout history in the saints, through great religious people like Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, and Teresa of Calcutta. And God is present in the world through us.

When Jesus tells his disciples that the master will be going away on a journey, he may have been talking about himself. In the parable Jesus may be the master and the disciples are the servants. Jesus may have been telling them that he will soon be going away, that he will no longer be with them. He may have been telling the disciples that they will need to become apostles, that he is entrusting them with the creation and mission of his church. Whether we think of the master as Jesus or God, the message is the same. The parable is a call to both discipleship and stewardship.

We all have talents that we can share with each other and with our church. Some of us have musical talent. Others of us couldn't carry a tune in a basket. Some of us have a gift for nurturing fellowship; some for undertaking the renovation of the building; some for handling the finances; some for the pastoral care of our members. Some of us have more money than others or make more money than others. We all do what we can in our support of our church and its mission. We share the talent or talents that have been entrusted to us by the Master to build up the body of Christ.

According to the parable, we are not only servants; we are also stewards. The divine Master has given us everything we have, including the gift of life. What we have does not belong to us. In fact, we do not even belong to ourselves. We belong to God and our talents belong to the world. Jesus tells us that we need to invest the talents that God has given us. If we do, we will discover something strange. Instead of having less, we will have more! Instead of

becoming depleted, we will be filled! This is because the measure we give will be the measure we receive.

Think of the beautiful music we heard this morning, music that was shared with us by our music director, our organist, and our choir. As we know only too well, these members of our church have been blessed with musical talent. If they stayed at home this morning, they would have essentially buried their talent in the ground. By coming here this morning, by sharing their talent with us, we will leave our service of worship feeling better, and I daresay they will also feel better. It is through their sharing that the gift they were given has multiplied.

In the parable, the first two servants invest the talents that were entrusted to them. Through their dedicated stewardship, they double what they have been given. Notice that on his return the master does not differentiate between them. His joy has nothing to do with the amount that each has produced. The master simply wants us to make the most of what we have. In his blessing of the first two servants, the master says,

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.

The servant who receives the master's judgment is the one who does not invest his talent. He buries his talent in the ground. He lives his life out of fear. He is like those who hold back on giving to their church because "the economy is bad." He is like those who cut back on their giving to missions out of the belief that "charity begins at home." This fear-based stance closes us down when we need to open up! It holds us back from a full and joyful participation in the life of our church. It builds a wall between us and our brothers and sisters who are in need around the world.

John Milton once said that he could not praise "a fugitive and cloistered virtue." A fugitive and cloistered virtue is a talent that is not shared, not invested in life. The worthless and slothful servant does not venture forth in life. He has no vision. He would probably tell us that our pledges will prove inadequate to cover our operating expenses and our building fund. He would tell us to set our sights low and play it safe.

Jesus calls us forth into a vision-filled stewardship of our time, talents, and treasure! He tells us how to make our talents grow. He tells us how to be good stewards. He reminds us of

the spiritual dimension of giving, of the joy that it returns to us. As recorded in the gospel of Luke, Jesus tells us,

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. (Luke 6:38)

In the parable of the talents, Jesus reminds us that much has been given to us. The Master has blessed us with differing talents, talents in abundance. Because much has been given to us, much is expected. In the movie *Spiderman*, Peter Parker's uncle says to him, "With great gifts comes great responsibility." Jesus tells us that much is expected of us as servants, as stewards of the Master.

Jesus calls us to be like the servants who invested their talents and then watched them grow. He calls us to be the type of servant, the type of disciple, the type of steward to whom, on the day of accounting, the Master will say,

Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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