

***Invitation to Adventure***  
**A Sermon on Matthew 25:14-30**  
**Proper 28**  
**November 15, 2020**

**Introduction**

This is the second of three parables about the kingdom of God in Matthew's Judgment Discourse. Last week was the Parable of the Ten Teenage Girls. Next week is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Today is the Parable of the Talents.

Last week we saw that the kingdom was about being creative and spontaneous. Today it is about adventure and risk-taking. Adventure is what makes life worth living. It is the newness breaking into our lives.

**First Move: An Allegorical Reading**

The parable features a master and three slaves. A master is preparing to go on a long journey. He calls three slaves and turns over his property to them.

Slavery was different in the ancient world from the United States. Slaves were often prisoners of war; sometimes they were people who had sold themselves or their children into slavery to satisfy debts. They were slaves only for a fixed number of years; debt slaves were released once their debts were paid. There was no such thing as generational slavery; people weren't born into slavery. Joel pointed out Wednesday night that the Hebrew slaves in Egypt actually were like slaves in the United States. That is one reason that the Exodus story has such power for African-Americans. Slavery in Egypt was an unusual form of slavery in the ancient world.

The master has eight talents. A talent was roughly 57 pounds of silver. It was worth 6000 drachmas. A drachma was a Greek coin that was equal to a day's wage. Six thousand drachmas would be about 16 years of wages. Don't think of a talent as money; think of it as a pile of silver that is worth a lot of money.

The master hands over roughly 450 pounds of silver to the slaves. These were no ordinary slaves. The master trusted these slaves. They had shown the ability to handle large sums of money. This is another difference in ancient slavery. Slaves with skills were given important jobs to do. They could be managers of the household.

The master gives five talents to the first slave, two talents to the second slave, and one talent to the third slave. The man gives the slaves how much he thinks they are capable of caring for.

The first two slaves worked and doubled their money. It doesn't say what kind of work they did or how they doubled the money. The third slave dug a hole in the ground and buried the money.

It sounds foolish to us today, but the third slave was doing the honorable thing. Rabbinic law provided that burying money was the safest way to take care of someone else's money. There were no banks. Hiding the money kept thieves from taking it. Underground was the safest place to hide things. Finding buried treasure was not unusual. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount that the kingdom of God is like finding buried treasure in a field.

When the master returns from his journey, he settles accounts with his slaves.

The first slave was given five talents and made five more. The master congratulates him: "Well done, good and trustworthy servant." The master says he will put him in charge of many things. He invites the slave, "Enter into the joy of your master."

The second slave was given two talents and made two more. The master treats him the same way, congratulating him, giving him more responsibility and inviting him to share in his joy.

In the Middle Ages the word *talent* came to have the primary meaning that we associate with it today: natural aptitude or skill. That meaning comes from the skill that the first two slaves demonstrated in investing their talents. Think of it as the silver that is within each of us.

The third slave was given one talent. He tells the master, "I knew that you [were] a hard man, harvesting where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter. Behold, you have that which is yours."

The master calls the slave hesitant and worthless. He orders the talent to be taken from him and given to the slave with ten talents.

Matthew gives this parable an allegorical reading. Matthew intends for us to understand this parable as a vision of the Final Judgment. When the master settles accounts with the three slaves, it is Jesus acting as judge of three disciples. The time that takes place from the master's leaving on the journey until he returns symbolizes the delay of the Parousia, the Second Coming of Jesus. The incomparable treasure that been given to the slaves is the gospel, which God graciously gives to the disciples.

Matthew adds the punch lines at the end of the parable. "To whoever has, it will be given and he will have in abundance. To the one not having, it will be taken from him."

Matthew also adds the words of judgment. The master commands that the useless servant be cast into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The parable in Matthew's allegorical reading is directed to the church. It is intended to encourage disciples to take risks in sharing the gospel. The threat of judgment is what will happen if disciples act out of fear instead of acting boldly.

## **Second Move: Taking a Second Look at Master and Third Slave**

Scholars believe that this parable must likely come from the historical Jesus. Jesus may be teasing us into taking a second look at the master.

Jesus sometimes uses people with less than admirable qualities in his parables, such as the dishonest steward and the unjust judge. These characters would be viewed unsympathetically by the audience. The Good Samaritan is an example. Samaritans were despised by Jews. The parable of the Good Samaritan forced audiences to take a second look at their assumptions about Samaritans.

What does the audience assume about the master? Another version of the parable of the talents appears in the Gospel of Luke immediately following the story of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. Jesus redeemed Zacchaeus in the eyes of the crowd. Jesus could look beyond his status as a chief tax collector and see the inside of the cup. Perhaps he is doing the same thing in this parable about a rich landowner. Perhaps we could take a second look at people who have different political beliefs or a different political party.

There is nothing in the parable to justify the charge that the master is harsh. He distributed eight talents to the slaves, "to each according to his ability." The master did not put an undue burden on any slave.

The master does not give the slaves instructions on what to do with the talents. He goes away and gives the slaves freedom and room to grow.

The master was generous with the first two slaves. He congratulated them and gave them more responsibility. The slaves would have been allowed to share in some of the profit.

By rewarding the slaves with more responsibility, the master would have reminded the audience of what the rabbis had taught them. "God does not give greatness to a man until he has proven himself in a small matter." Only then does he promote him to a great post. God tested David with sheep. God says in 2 Samuel 7:8, "You were found faithful with the sheep. I will give you my sheep that you should feed them."

The master even invites the first two slaves to share his joy. He is transforming their relationship into something approaching equality.

The third slave says that he knew the master was harsh and unjust. We have no evidence of this. His treatment of the first two slaves shows just the opposite.

The parable also challenges the audience to take a second look at the third slave. The audience would have presumed that he was acting out of prudence by burying the talent. The slave says, however, that he acted out of fear not prudence. "I was afraid and went away and hid your talent in the ground." The slave works out of a false understanding of the master. The slave does not trust the master, even though the master trusted him.

The audience has a dilemma: How should I view the master? How should I view the slave?

Trusting God means trusting other people. Lack of faith causes the slave to act fearfully. In other parts of the gospel, Jesus castigates the disciples for lack of faith. The first two slaves are faithful when they are confronted by a demanding master. They act boldly. They take risks. They stand in contrast to the third slave, who is paralyzed by fear. He plays it safe instead of taking risks.

Alfred North Whitehead, the father of process theology, famously said, "The pure conservative is fighting against the essence of the universe." Life is not static. Life is about constant change. Whitehead saw the essence of reality as the process of perishing and becoming. Process theology gets its name from this insight: reality is always in motion; it is always in the process of becoming something new.

That is not to say that nothing endures. There are enduring personalities and enduring ideals that give shape to our lives and our culture.

Our choices are to advance or remain static. Our challenge is to bring the enduring in harmony with the novel. Repetition diminishes our awareness. Convention dominates; orthodoxy suppresses adventure. Adventure requires a leap of imagination. It takes us beyond the safe limits of the status quo.

### **Third Move: Taking Risks as a Church**

Jesus issues each of us an invitation to adventure. Jesus simply said, "Follow me," inviting the disciples be part of a journey that kept surprising them at every turn in the road. They leave everything behind to follow Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon tell us in their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* that when we are baptized, we jump onto a moving train. We become part of a journey that began long before we got here and will continue long after we are gone. We are placed in the middle of an adventure that is nothing

less than God's purpose for the world. The little story that each of us calls *my life* is given cosmic, eternal significance as it is caught up within God's larger account of history.

The master rewards the first two slaves for their initiative. What would he have done if they had lost all their talents in a risky venture? The master likely would have still applauded their efforts. The point of the story is not about accumulating wealth; it is about taking risks. As a theological statement, the parable is directed to the church not to individuals. It is not about self-improvement, encouraging people to be entrepreneurs; it is about discipleship in a church.

We don't usually think of living out our faith as risky. Many people come to church for comfort and reassurance. We are seeking shelter from the storm.

The gospel is a treasure. It was given to us as a gift with strings attached: we will share it with people, not bury it. Our charge is to continually look for new ways to share the gospel.

We are a small church and getting smaller. It would be easy for us just to withdraw into our shell and cut back on any expenditures. That would be hastening our death.

We have done just the opposite. Mary started two new missions for our church this year, taking water and clothing to the Navajo Nations during a pandemic and sponsoring a refugee family from the Congo. Karen and David Bagwell asked Mary to expand Mother's Day Out to include distance learning for grade-school students so that we could give parents a place to bring their children during the day so that they can go to work. Teacher's aides help the children with their remote learning while they are here.

We have had four acres of our land for sale for over two years now. One of these days we will get a buyer. Selling one acre on 178<sup>th</sup> Street would bring in about \$400,000. Think of what we could do with the money. We have always been held back by having our church building so far from 178<sup>th</sup> Street. We could dramatically increase our presence on the road. We could build a driveway from 178<sup>th</sup> Street to our parking lot so it will be easier for people to see how to get to us. We can install an electronic sign, and your pastors could think of creative things to say on the sign. We could build a retaining pond and turn it into fountains with landscaping. We could put outdoor worship furniture just outside the loggia and worship outside once a month. Of course, it would be handicap accessible. People from the road could see us worship.

We started the New Beginnings process two years ago and it has helped us to analyze our community and consider our options for reaching out to the community.

We have been incorporating multimedia into our worship services to make them more accessible to younger generations. Eighteen months ago, we added TV monitors and PowerPoint to help people who process information visually. We started audio taping our services and putting podcasts on Facebook. Cece put our worship on Zoom last month. Now we are doing in-person and Zoom so that people who can't worship with us in person can worship with us virtually.

We are not abandoning the enduring elements in worship; we are increasing them. We now read all four lectionary lessons during worship. We have added a Call to Worship that is based on the lessons of the day. We also have added the Great Thanksgiving during festival seasons.

Cece and Phyllis have written future stories for the church that we will be presenting to the congregation to vote on in December. They try to imagine what we will be doing as a church in five years.

One of my favorite things in their future stories is for us to be known as a community center that brings in speakers every month or so to address topics that are most relevant to our community. We have already had speakers on police and racial relations. That is a topic we can continue to explore. We can also have talks on criminal-justice reform, immigrants and refugees, gun violence, mental health, school safety. We have hosted Jesus Seminar on the Road and John Dear.

Cece wants us to be known as the peace and justice church. We have made a good start. We need to keep building on that.

## **Conclusion**

Fear clouds our perceptions. It distorts our view of reality. It will cause us to bury our talent in the ground.

As a small church, it is even more important that we be bold and courageous. We must look for new and creative ways to take our light out from under the bushel basket and place it on the lampstand. Then our light will shine before our community and give glory to God.

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