

"Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." Please be seated

Sing:

*It's not just what you're born with, it's what you choose to bear  
It's not how large your share is but how much you can share  
And it's not the fights you dream of, but those you really fought  
It's not just what you're given, it's what you do with what you got.  
Amen. (Start to walk off.)*

You didn't think I was going to let you off this easy? I do think that this little chorus from my hero Si Kahn sums up this gospel very nicely. But the Parable of the Talents needs a little more attention than that. I find it a pretty dangerous story in the wrong hands. Hand it over to the third servant in today's gospel and you likely would have a world where literally "to all who have, more will be given and to those who have nothing, even that will be taken away." That sounds a bit too much like my news feed these days.

I don't think that's what the Spirit is saying to the Church in today's Gospel. So what is she up to?

I think when encountering the Parable of the Talents it helps to consider Matthew's community. One theory is that this is a wealthy, urban, Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> It's around year 80, about 50 years after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension. It's been 10 years since the Romans sacked the Temple in Jerusalem, and Judaism is in disarray. These believers have been living with the idea that Jesus, the son of Man, will return and end the age. But the actual day and hour is unknown.

So Matthew's community wants to know how are we to live in the meantime, when the meantime might be a day, a year or 2000 years? How are we to live when everything seems to be falling apart and we're no longer getting along with our fellow Jews in the "synagogue across the street."<sup>2</sup>

For this community, one answer lies in Jesus' Parable of the Talents.

A very wealthy man goes on a journey. He leaves his property in the care of his slaves, which is understandable in a region where a Roman slave could rise to manage the master's holdings. He entrusts them with anywhere from one to five talents. A talent was originally a unit to measure wealth, the weight of gold or silver. One reckoning would put the value of a talent of gold at about one-and-a-quarter million US dollars.<sup>3</sup> So these guys are being entrusted with property worth millions.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, "POLEMICAL PARABLES IN MATTHEW 24-25" in Union Seminary Quarterly Review 44 (1991): 287-298 © 1991 by Union Theological Seminary

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia -- [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent\\_\(weight\)](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent_(weight))

So what do they do with it? The first two immediately invest the money and double it. They weren't asked to do this. We don't get any indication of what they thought of their master. Just that they figured that their responsibility was to put this money to work -- immediately.

Now the third slave, we do know what he thinks of the master. He considers him to be greedy, unfair and harsh. He is someone to be feared. This is a lot of responsibility. Why risk getting in trouble? And why do any more for someone you have no regard for at all?

The master returns after a long time, and goes to settle accounts. The first two immediately hand over the money they have made.. And of course the master is pleased – enter into my joy he says. And what do they get in reward? They get MORE RESPONSIBILITY! MORE WORK! Let this be a cautionary tale to anyone who would work in a church or a non profit!

Now the third slave did exactly as he was told. So what is it about him that is so insulting to the master? I think what's most dismaying to the master is the slave's fear, his resentment, and his fervent belief that this is a greedy, harsh overlord who will do terrible things to you if you cross him. The story doesn't insist that the master is actually like this. This doesn't seem to be the opinion of the first two slaves. But it is the attitude that shapes the third slave's decision. That incurs the master's wrath. The slave loses his position of responsibility.

So how does Matthew's community hear this parable?

Notice In Matthew's telling there is a difference between the servants' abilities and what has been put in their care. What they have been given to tend and to steward did not belong to them. It belonged to the master the whole time. And when he returned he wanted it back.

What has been given to Matthew's community that does not belong to them? What has been placed among these people of differing ability that they are expected to steward until Jesus returns? In the early church, the talents of this parable were understood to represent the Word of God. If you were given the Word of God to tend, you certainly didn't bury it. You preached it, proclaimed it, lived it, died for it. And it spread and grew – 30, 60 and 100 fold – to quote a another parable about rich yields and poor ones.

Now somewhere along the way – some say in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century -- the definition of talent changed to the meaning we use today: innate abilities, "God-given gifts".<sup>4</sup> And after that the moral of the parable became to use your God-Given abilities well, don't hide them away, take some initiative. But the pitfall here is one of pride and privilege – Oh we know who the talented are and aren't. Anybody have those ability -based reading groups in school – who was a cardinal? Who was a blue jay? And who was robin? If this is a parable about innate abilities, what does it mean to say that those who have little, will have even that taken away from them? This is where the parable gets dangerous in the wrong hands.

As Church today, we're not unlike Matthew's community. We still tell the story of a late arriving bridegroom, a thief in the night, a master returning at any time, though it could be a day, or a year, or 2000 years. And what are we to do in the meantime? Especially when the time seems so very mean?

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Thysell, "Unearthing the Treasure, Unknitting the Napkin: The Parable of the Talents as Justification for Early Modern Women's Preaching and Prophesying" in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol 15 No 1, spring 1999.

The Gospel asks us today to consider: What has Christ given us – his church -- to tend and to steward that does not belong to us? What will help us ensure that what Christ has put in our care thrives and grows? What fears compel us to bury or stifle or deaden that which we are asked to tend?

And it also subtly asks us what kind of a God do we believe we serve? If that God is one who knows and regards us in our varied abilities and lovingly entrusts us to steward the Divine Life as best we can, ... then our ministry and discipleship will look a lot like that. It will be expansive, and gracious and merciful and inclusive and fruitful.

But if that God is cast like a harsh master, an intolerant perfectionist, a punishing overlord – then the ministry that flows from that image will look much the same: fearful, condemning, rejecting, stingy.

This is what's at stake for the disciples who do nothing to grow their own ability to love fearlessly: they will ultimately find the little love they have will run out long before the master returns. And that which the Christ has placed in their care will atrophy as a result.

My brothers and sisters, the good news is that we of varied abilities, varied strengths and talents are not asked to tend the holy things of Christ alone. Our collective ability lies in the care we have for one another --- that is our very identity as church. So that when some of us suffer, others of us have the ability to respond. When some are weak and fall, others have the ability to lift them, perhaps carry them for awhile. When some grow weary or doubtful or despairing, others among us have the ability to comfort, to listen to accompany.

And that is how we as the Church –as the Body of Christ -- strengthen our collective ability to tend all that Jesus entrusts to our care.

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*It's not just what you're given, it's what you do with what you got.*

Amen.