

November 15, 2020

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USING OUR GIFTS

Matthew 25: 14-30

I don't know about you but when I hear the parable of the talents, the thing that has always jumped out at me is its rather nasty ending. This rich master give his servants some money, distributing various amounts among them, and then he leaves. They do the best they can with it, each according to his own ability. Then when the Master returns and they are all forced to render an accounting of what they have done with his money, the Master goes berserk, beating up on the poor little one-talent guy. For a long time I was troubled by this Master's response. I just kept coming back to the question: why did the Master get so angry?

Okay, I'll admit that maybe the servant was overly cautious. He didn't go out and wheel and deal like the other servants and therefore did not get spectacular returns on his investments. But after all, remember that this guy only had one talent. When you've only got one talent, you can't afford to go out and take risks.

I remember the time I talked with an investment counselor to begin planning for retirement. He talked to me about various levels of investment, namely those investments that incur great risk, and those others who, while they are slow growing, have very little risk. Then I told him how much I had to invest, and he immediately said, "Well, we won't be looking for any investments with a great deal of risk. With that small amount of money, what you want is safety and security, not risk!"

So forgive me if in listening to this story I most closely identify with the one-talent servant. And forgive me if I wince at the end when the Master returns and lowers the boom on the man who only had one talent. I can imagine that the Master could accuse this guy of using poor investment strategy, of lacking a certain sense of adventure when it comes to finances, but the Master goes far beyond that. His reaction and the way he beats up on the little one-talent man seems extreme.

But as we take another look at the story we might remember that Jesus, who is nearing the end of his opportunities to teach, is revealing something about someone other than the servant – someone like God!

Notice that the action in this story begins because of the initiative of the Master. Out of the blue, this Master calls in his servants and drops upon them a huge amount of money. Maybe that escaped us because we don't know what a talent is. According to various Bible commentaries, a talent consists of between five and fifteen years of wages! Do your math= we're talking big money here. What would you do if someone dropped five or ten, or even fifteen years' worth of wages on you?

So the one-talent guy who doesn't have nearly as much as the others, tries to act responsibly, and his reward is that the Master rips his pitiful one talent out of his hands and gives it to one of the others. Now why is it that I'm shocked by that reaction of the Master, but not shocked by the opening lines of this parable? Listen!

"For it is as if a man going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them." This is some kind of master! Can you imagine it? The master calls in his slaves and gives them access to everything he's got: the key to the wine cellar, the key to the Cadillac, all his personal passwords and access codes to his accounts and portfolio – everything!

I remind you that Jesus told this story at the end of Matthew's Gospel. In just a couple of chapters the story will end with Jesus on the Cross. On the way to the cross, Jesus tells this story about a Lord and Master who called in his servants and gave them everything he had. Jesus is on his way to Calvary to give away everything he's got. God is giving us everything.

For me, that begins to put the Master's anger in context. He who has given everything has the right to be angry with the overly-cautious servant. Doesn't the Master have a right to expect much of the servants since he trusted them with so much? And so this parable that had me asking, "Master, how could you do this to this little servant?," now has me asking, "Master, what I have done with all you have given me?"

Look at us gathered here this morning in our respective homes. We are a bunch of ordinary people, to be sure. And yet, this parable says that something extraordinary has been given to us. Jesus has given us the kingdom. So now there is an accounting, a judgment, a question – What have you done with what I've given you?

What should be done with these treasures we've been given? Not only the basic things like food, shelter, our family and friends, but our skills, abilities, passions and spiritual gifts. This a level of graciousness from God that is simply beyond our understanding. So again I ask, what should be done with these treasures? As the parable suggests they should be invested responsibly, and when possible, lavishly. They should not be hoarded or hidden away. To us individually, our little gifts or talents may not seem like much. But when used in service to others and to glorify God, they can be a marvelous gift. Some of us sing, some teach, some work with numbers, some have the gift of listening to others and showing compassion, some are generous with our monetary resources, some build and repair, and some even sell pumpkins! Whatever constitutes that one little thing we can do can be a sign of the in-breaking realm of God. It can be an ordinary glimpse of the extraordinary graciousness of God.

When we were talking about this passage in Bible study on Wednesday, it was noted that the guy with the one talent was fearful of making a mistake. Fear can stop us in our tracks, and quite honestly, in this time of Covid-19, we have every right to be fearful. We do have

to pull back, and so sharing our treasures and talents requires more creativity. I loved Cheryl Pinder's reminder in Wednesday's Oasis about doing Random Acts of Kindness – small things that show kindness, and bring some sunshine to someone's life – someone who may need it more than we could every know.

Of all the gifts given to us as God's people, one of the greatest gifts is faith, which I define as belief and trust in God. We who have received the gift of faith have the responsibility to share it and spread it around as best and as often as we can. I know it seems difficult right now, but faith that is shared is a gift that will grow; faith that is hoarded or hidden will at best remain dormant and at worst, it will crumble and decay.

When there is an accounting at the end, we will be asked a very simple question: What have you done with what I have given you? If we have generously shared who we are and what we have with each other, our Master will say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Master." May it be so.

Amen.