

Matthew 25:14-30
November 15, 2020
“Why We Don’t Know What to Do with our Talents”
Rev. Randy Smith

I want to begin the sermon this morning by noting that **Preachers live different lives** than all the rest of you. All the rest of you spend your time between Sundays *thinking* -- and often *worrying* -- about *many* things: how to pay the bills this month; how to be supportive of, and/or keep in touch with the people who matter most to you in life; when and how will the 2020 Presidential election ever end, etc. Preachers *think* -- *and worry* -- about all that stuff, *too*. But we *also* spend all week thinking -- and worrying -- about passages of ancient Scripture, and how to read them -- *helpfully, truthfully* -- in the year 2020, and so convey the **living Word of God** through them -- in *helpful, truthful* ways -- to their congregations.

Passages of Scripture such as the *famous* -- which we may find to be *infamous*? -- "Parable of the Talents" found in Mt. 25.

I *first* want to make it clear that there are a *number* of ways in which this parable can be severely *mis-read*. One example: it is *in no way* a story intended to give a **divine stamp of approval** to *any* economic system we humans may devise, such as "market economies" or lending money *at interest*. Such systems obviously existed at the time Jesus first told the story (although OT law strictly prohibited lending money at interest to fellow Jews, and condemned those who did -- Ps. 15:5; cf. also Jesus' teaching on lending, Lk. 6:35). So, these elements of the story are there as "**givens**", in the sense that it is simply what -- at least *some* -- people did. So, there is no debate going on here, e.g., as in the recently popular debate about capitalism or socialism -- both of which modern concepts were *unknown* in Jesus' time.

Another example: that Jesus, when he talks about "talents" here can be understood as talking about all manner of natural gifts and abilities. The Greek word here, *talanton*, is *not* an ability. It is **money**. Cold, hard cash. Moolah. And it is -- for *ordinary* people, anyway -- an **unimaginably large** amount of money. A single "talent" in Jesus' day equated to a **weight** of silver or gold so heavy that it would be difficult for an average person to pick it up, and had a value equal to something like **15 years** of an average worker's wages. So, we are dealing in this parable -- in the figure of the "Master" -- a man of **elite wealth**.

This parable is part of a *series* of parables, reaching back into c. 24, which the Gospel writer, Matthew, has arranged in order to help the Church of *his* day (last quarter of the 1st-c. AD) understand that the **primary characteristic** of Christian life in the world is that we are **waiting**: *waiting* for the crucified, resurrected and ascended Jesus to come again, *viz.*, *waiting* on the **culmination** of the **world-redeeming work** he began with his *first* coming. Given that this is the case, the **preeminent question** facing the Church -- **both then and now** -- is what we are to be *devoted* to doing *in the interim*.

And the *traditional* interpretation of the Parable of the Talents has supplied an *answer* to this question: while we are *waiting*, we are to make **use** of *whatever we have* (including our money) and can *do*, in order to be *productive, fruitful* servants of the Lord. Matthew has earlier in his Gospel made sure we heard Jesus saying such things as, "You will know them by their fruits" (7:16), and "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (7:21). In light of this, it is

understandable that we might hear Jesus saying much the same again in c. 25 -- "Be fruitful, **or else!**"

But, there are **problems** with this rendering, the *chief* problem being how this message actually *fits* with the life of Jesus portrayed elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel. The problem *arises* when we try and understand the parable as an **allegory** or, i.e., a story in which the figures and elements in the story are supposed to be translatable into *other* figures or elements. And people have done this, making the Master into God (or Jesus).

The *problem* is that the God we know through Jesus does not act in the way this Master acts. In fact, there is **an implied condemnation** of the Master's ethics and morals, and of the whole economic system portrayed here. Remember that the first two **slaves are**, at the *beginning* of the story and at the *end* -- even *after* having their success rewarded with a *doubling* of their *oversight* of their Master's wealth -- never more *than slaves*. And did you notice that the Master never bothers to *dispute* the third slave's characterization of him, namely as "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed" (25:24) -- *viz.*, as basically a **scoundrel** of businessman?

Can we really think that the Jesus who says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (11:28) could be the **same** Jesus who later turns around and says, "Hey, you know I was just kidding about that 'My yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (11:29) stuff!"?

No. But we *can* hear the **same** Jesus teaching us about what **faithfulness in waiting** for his return *means*, what it *looks like* and *requires*. And what it means, looks like and requires is that the Church be **always actively waiting**, always *actively* seeking as great a "return" as possible, on the "investment" of **all of the resources** which we find ourselves to have been entrusted with, the **greatest** of those resources *always* being, *not* our wealth -- as critically important as it is that is that we use this faithfully -- but rather **the gospel itself, and** that we not allow our **fears**, of *whatever* kind, to keep us from doing this.

The **problem** for us is that the **greatest** resource we, the Church, have been given -- the gospel -- is just **too** valuable, **too** precious, or at least **more so** than we are **willing**, it seems, to *appreciate*, and make *full use of*. **Viz.**, we *regularly* fail to appreciate the gospel's power to **change** lives, **heal** lives -- including *our own* -- **and** heal whole *systems* of human relationships. And *here* I am thinking of the gospel as being the pronouncement by God over **our** lives as over *Jesus'* life, "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, with whom I am well-pleased" (Mt. 3:17). Could there **be** any better gospel, any better "Good News" pronounced over our lives than this?

But I'm not sure we don't actually **fear** the gospel and **fear** what the gospel can **do**, both in our individual lives and in the world around us. I have, e.g., this **persistent** sense -- maybe you do, too? -- that I *should* be, and *could* be, a *different*, a better person, and that my fully **trusting** the gospel, and so **entrusting** myself to the gospel, is the **key** to this "better me" coming to be.

But our fear of the gospel leads us into practicing something like "**Christianity Lite**" (L-i-t-e). It's not that our faith in Christ isn't real or sincere. It's just that we are **fearful** of letting it *change* us, or change us *much*, **fearful** of **exposing**, or having exposed, all that we are all, always **concealing** -- within our hearts and minds, within our marriages and homes -- and allowing the gospel to bring **healing within** us *and*, in terms of our **moral habits** -- what we actually do, how we actually regard, and relate with others in Jesus' name every day -- bring healing to our **whole way of life-together** with others.

I recently stumbled across a book by the – now tragically deceased -- young Christian writer by the name of Rachel Held **Evans** (died in 2019, at 37), called *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. In the book, she quotes theologian Walter Brueggemann as saying, "Churches should be the most **honest** place in town, **not** the happiest place in town." In the same chapter, she describes AA meetings, which create the kind of *fellowship* and *intimacy* which, she notes, the vast majority of congregations whose *buildings* they use would -- **if** they were willing to take **the risk** -- *love* to experience.

She writes, "Imagine if every church became a place where *everyone* is **safe**, but *no one* is **comfortable**. Imagine if every church became a place where we told one another the truth. We might," she says, "just create sanctuary." That word "**sanctuary**", of course, in Christian tradition, has the **double** meaning of "safe space" and also "place of **sanctification**", *viz.*, "holiness". Or, i.e., a place -- really a people -- capable of helping *me* be a **better me**. And *you* be a **better you**. And, above all, making the whole Church better at **faithful waiting**.

I.e., a Church willing -- **like**, but **not in the same way as!** -- those **first two slaves**, who are willing to take their Master's mega-wealth and **gamble** with it in the marketplace -- *viz.*, a Church willing to **take real risks** in order to maximize their "ROI".

The **third** slave, however -- who openly confesses that he acts on the basis of **fear** (v. 28) -- **refuses** to take *any* risk *whatsoever*, simply *burying* his "talent" in the ground (which, in Jesus' day, was **the safest thing** to do with something valuable).

In his comments on this passage, James Howell suggests that we **can** see, in the third slave's **burial** of his talent, "the **harbinger of the burial of the Church**." In an era, i.e., of the numerical and institutional decline of the Church in American culture -- during which time, *at every step along the way*, it has *always* seemed **the safest thing**, in almost **every** Committee on Finance, in almost **every** congregation, **not** to *expect* too much, in terms of the commitment of its members, financial and otherwise, and so **not** to *act*, in terms of funding the church's ministry, **boldly**, and **creatively**, with an *expansive* vision of what the gospel might be able to effect, in the local community and beyond -- we have turned what is *typically* regarded as a **virtue** -- *viz.*, **prudence** in financial matters -- into a **vice**, making it into a kind of **self-protectiveness** which -- *eventually*, unless *reversed* early on -- sends congregations into a **downward spiral** which is hard to escape from.

Our asking to have Chrisie Reeves-Pendergrass be appointed to us as an Outreach Pastor -- this is a **good sign**, a sign that both the leadership of the S.C. Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church and St. Matthew, are ready to act, **boldly**, and **creatively**, and with an **expansive** vision of what the gospel might be able to effect, in St. Matthew, in Greenville and beyond.

Why do we not know what to do with our "talents"? Because we -- fundamentally -- do not appreciate their value. Their power. Their hopefulness.

But -- **perhaps** -- **now** we **do**.