

Introduction to the Theme:

Pretend I'm your boss. You've never actually met me face-to-face, but you've heard lots of things about me, and everyone who works with you talks about what a good boss I am. They all try to be like me, because they admire the fact that I'm peaceful and kind, and loving. I'm patient and encouraging, and I forgive people when they mess up—I always give them another chance, because I know that mistakes are an opportunity to learn. And most people do try to learn from their mistakes.

One day, I come to and give you a big bag of money and say to you, "I'd like you to look after this bit of my money for a while. I'm not going to tell you what to do with it—that's totally up to you. But please do take good care of it."

What do you think you'd do with that money?

Now, let's pretend again, but this time I want you to imagine me differently. I'm your boss and, again, you've never met me face-to-face. But instead of hearing how kind and good I am, how patient and forgiving, no one ever really talks about me. The few things you've heard about me have been things like I'm quite scary and mean, I get angry all the time, and I'm not very forgiving or encouraging. All I care about is my money and my stuff. And everyone you work with is sort of similar to that—they're quite selfish, and unkind, not really looking out for anyone but themselves.

One day, I come to you and give you a big bag of money. You also saw me give five bags to someone else you work with, and two to the person who works in the room right next to yours.

When I hand you the bag of money, what do you think you'll do with it? Do you think you'll feel differently about what to do with the money depending on whether you think I'm a nice boss or a mean boss?

What if you *thought* I was a mean boss because no one ever *said* I was kind and generous . . . but you were wrong? What if it was just that none of the people you worked with knew me either, and so they just *assumed* I must be selfish and unkind because that's how so many of them were?

The gospel writer called Matthew wrote a story that Jesus told that was very much like this. It's pretty clear that Matthew understood that Jesus wanted people to try to get to know more about God, and not to assume that God is mean or selfish, like a lot of people. Every single one of us has been asked to take care of God's world and God's people—and all of us have been given different sorts of gifts, different talents, you could say different numbers of bags of gold. And God wants us to do adventurous things with the gifts we've been given, so that more people can be helped. But some people are fearful. They don't do anything with the gifts they've been given, because they're afraid that they'll make a mistake, or ruin something, or somehow make God angry. So they don't do anything. And when they don't do anything except pretend like the gifts don't exist, they keep others from being helped too, and that does make God sad, and even angry. Because our main job in this world is to help others to know that God loves them and cares for them.

'What are you expecting?'
16 November, 2014
Wheatley U.R.C.
Matthew 25:14-30
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
Rev'd. Tanya Stormo Rasmussen

Prayer: God of our hopes, and dreams, and expectations, reveal true loving character to us and through us, so that your life-giving work might be done. Open the wisdom of your Word to us, that it might feed and nourish us for our journey of faith.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

What did you like best about Matthew's 'Parable of the Talents'?
Was there anything comforting about it?
What *troubled* you about the parable?

There are all sorts of things about Matthew's 'The Parable of the Talents' that make us uncomfortable, aren't there? For starters, the practice of slavery is abhorrent to us, and it seems strange to modern ears that Jesus seemed to speak so comfortably about a master and his slaves, without a word of censure regarding the social structure. And the story could have included a lot more details, which might have made it easier to absorb. But as it is, we have this troubling picture of a slaveholder, handing different sums over to three of his slaves, without any instruction as to what to do with the wealth. It simply says he "summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them . . . then he went away." (Matt. 25:14-16)

What was Jesus suggesting by all of this? What was the message he wanted his disciples to hear?

On the first point, it's important to know that in Jesus' day, slavery was understood and practiced quite differently from the more modern images we have—especially those that immediately spring to mind, of African-American slavery, and even more contemporary human trafficking. Jesus didn't condone the ownership by one human being of another; we belong to one another not as possessions, but as care-givers and ministers.

Still, Jesus was quite clear-eyed about the fact that, while each human being is of equal sacred worth to God, we are nonetheless endowed with a range of abilities—some much more capable than others. And we find ourselves in a range of stations in the social order of our world, sometimes because of our aptitudes, other times because of happenstance, or politics, or other means. In any case, as we try to make sense of Jesus' message for our lives here, it's best not to let ourselves get too bogged down by the issues of slavery or inequity in the story because they can distract us from the more important points.

So, back to the unsettling narrative. The master has entrusted valuables to the slaves and left them to do with their respective portions what they would. Two of the three—confident and adventuresome types, the two with mentalities of abundance and opportunity—immediately set out to *do* something with what they'd been given. And both of them doubled their original portion.

The third, of course, is risk-averse at best; it's entirely possible that he's insecure, a "pleaser" type who's experienced some failure, and can't quite cope with the idea of losing a bit of the nest egg. (I think one of the most uncomfortable things about this parable is that many of us can relate to that guy if it's a case of not wanting to disappoint, or fear of failure.)

Maybe he thought that because he'd not been given clear instruction as to what to do with the sum, he'd best not do anything—keeping a low profile, he'd learned, was the surest way to stay out of trouble. In any case, his mentality is one of scarcity, and fear of losing what "little" he had (though we know it was a great sum). At worst, it's possible he's lazy and really can't be bothered to do anything more than bury the stuff until his master returns. Whatever the rationale, that's what he did.

When the master did return, the first two proudly presented the proceeds of what they'd earned: double what they'd been entrusted with. Glowing, lavish praise came from the master—which *could* give the impression that all that mattered to him was maximum profit. But what if the effusiveness was genuine celebration *with* the two for what they'd come to understand? Both times, he concludes by promising them still more to work with in the future, and saying, "Enter into the joy of your master." The first two slaves have now entered the understanding and delight that the master has, which is the recognition that employing whatever they have for a greater good actually pays exponential dividends.

When it came to the single-portion slave's turn to report, he stepped forward and stammered something about being afraid, because he "knew his master was a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed" (v. 24). And then he confessed that he had done nothing more than hiding the talent in the ground. But at least it was safe—a little dirty, perhaps, but all there; not a penny less than he'd been given.

No sooner had the slave given his excuse than the master became the very type of character the slave expected: he was very harsh man, indeed, judging the slave to be "wicked, and lazy"—condemning him to the sobbing, teeth-grinding outer darkness, after he gave the slave's entrusted portion to the colleague who had been given the biggest share in the first place.

It's almost as though each of the slaves experienced just the sort of master they expected and had prepared to meet.

According to Matthew, when Jesus told the parable we've been reflecting on this morning, the currency he said the master entrusted to his servants was talents. We know

that a talent was the largest biblical unit of measurement for weight, and it was also the Greek word used for the largest Jewish unit of currency. Some scholars estimate that a talent would have been worth about 20 years' wages of a common labourer.

But the word 'talent' today means something different. Linguistic scholars speculate that the way we use the word 'talent' in our language today actually derives from the popularity of this parable, which effectively transitioned the meaning of the word from a unit or measure of currency, to aptitude or ability.

It's curious to me that Jesus chose to tell the story using a unit of currency, given that he wasn't particularly enchanted by money—though he knew most other people were, which may be why he used it as the standard object that was distributed amongst the slaves. Then, as now, the subject of money is attention-grabbing, especially when we're talking about big money. It's also concrete, and something everyone can relate to, and therefore a good place to start when reflecting on how things work in this world.

But as people of faith, we regularly move from the concrete to the abstract, from material to more spiritual meanings and deeper truths—which might explain how and why there was a transition in meaning from being a specific unit of currency to referring to the more abstract concept of an aptitude or ability.

What if we don't think about the master's investment as being financial? What if what the master entrusted to them was love? What if it was hope, or faith, or kindness—any of those divine currencies that have real and lasting value? Then it becomes easier to see why the master would have been frustrated with the one-talent slave. It's not so hard, then, to understand why he would have accused the servant of being wicked, and lazy. Similar to cold, hard cash, immaterial love and faith, hope and kindness require action—often courageous, risky action—beyond just digging a hole and stuffing it in, in order to grow and multiply. The difference is, unlike with money, fearless actions taken for the sake of divine love or faith or hope or kindness, cannot result in a net loss.

Today is the penultimate—the next-to-last—Sunday in this liturgical year. Across the past several weeks, our lectionary lessons (and particularly the Gospel texts) have become increasingly ominous (some might say fraught) with warnings about being ready, because the end is coming. There have been images of light and darkness, and various ways of encouraging people of faith to seek the light, to live in the light, to be light. Our epistle lesson this morning, from Paul's first letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, sums up the mood and the attitude: "Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters," he wrote, "you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness." (1 Thess. 5:1-5)

When Paul and Matthew were writing, their first audiences were expecting a cataclysmic end to the Greco-Roman world order as they knew it, any day now. They were anxiously awaiting Jesus' imminent return, the Second Coming of Christ and the advent of a new, heavenly order.

As the years and millennia have rolled on, our faith-and-life understanding has changed. We no longer conceive of the world as being a flat, three-tiered universe where heaven is above the stars and Sheol or hell is beneath the earth's surface (at least, not literally). And, regardless of the images painted by some of the New Testament writers, most Christians I know no longer watch the skies expectantly for Jesus to come riding a cloud accompanied by a host of angels blowing trumpets; that would represent a literal rendering of a highly evocative, metaphorical image, and an unfortunate sort of spiritual short-circuiting.

What we can expect, however, is that the Advent of a new, heavenly order is imminent. It always is, and always has been. And we're meant to be part of ushering it in, if we're willing to accept the portion of God's largesse that's been entrusted to us and put it to work so that it can multiply. There are so many people who have no idea about the love of God, or the peace and freedom that Christ has to offer. Many of them are under the impression that there IS no God, and if there is one, then that God is vindictive or neglectful or harsh.

In Matthew's account, the Parable of the Talents can sound like a troubling tale of a God who is like a judgmental, unforgiving master. We know enough human examples of this for it to be an idea we might have about the greatest Master of all. *"But,"* as the writer and Minister Nancy Rockwell puts it, *"there is another side to Matthew's story, which is about our attitude, the way we use what we have been given. If it is our attitude that God, and life, are harsh and terrible masters, then like the servant with only one talent, we turn away from risk, and hide ourselves from the promise and prospect of divine glory as if it were a delusion, or worse, as if it were for other people: the lucky ones."*

"I believe Matthew is urging us to recognize that what we have been given to us to meet the problems we face, problems we can see. And that what is rejected in the servant who hid what he had, is his suspicion, his ill-will toward God and others. When we do not shrink from spending on bombs, but [resent or withhold] money for aid to the poor and the sick, we are the suspicious servant. And when we invest ourselves in meeting the sufferings of this world and work to set the suffering free, we create a wealth which is a divine reward, as hope, peace, joy, and abundance increase."¹

The God we reveal to the world is the God of our hopes, of our expectations, and yes—even of our fears. If we hope for a God who doesn't ask much of us, if we opt to live in fear, refusing to risk for the sake of love or hope, faith or joy, because we expect a God who is full of harsh judgment and condemnation, then that is probably what we'll discover in the end.

¹ <http://biteintheapple.com/the-risk-takers/>

But if we choose to risk everything in order to grow the portion of God's kingdom that's been entrusted to us, then we will discover and fully enter into the wonder, delight, and joy of our master, who *is* only love. Hallelujah! Amen.