

Camille Cook Howe
Matthew 25:14-30
Georgetown Presbyterian Church

November 6th, 2022
Stewardship Sunday
Use What You Got

The parables of Jesus are gifts that keep on giving. You can read and reread them and discover different things each time. Today's parable is no different and each biblical scholar seems to come at this text with a slightly different angle. One master gives his three slaves – five talents, two talents, and one talent. Two do the right thing with the talents while one gets it all wrong. The one who gets it wrong is the most interesting. Jesus was telling the disciples this story for a specific reason and so what is it we need to learn from the one slave who was cast into outer darkness? It seems important for us to figure this out because the land of weeping and gnashing of teeth is not a place, I am interested in.

One thing that I found important to know is that a talent is a unit of money – a lot of money. Scholar Gene Boring estimates in the New Interpreter's Bible that one talent is, "the wages of a day laborer for fifteen years." So, the guy with five talents is given more than a lifetime's worth of salary. Let's think of this as these three have been given either five million, two million, or one million dollars. Not too shabby for any of them, I would say. They are all given a LOT of money to deal with and seemingly given no instructions for what to do with the funds.

Now this is not a parable about how to be a good investment banker, fundamentally I believe this text is a lesson about how to be a good disciple. Each of the disciples sitting with Jesus is getting one talent, or two, or five. They are each being entrusted with something valuable, treasured, and sacred. Now Jesus was poor so he wasn't giving them money and Jesus wasn't powerful so they weren't getting jobs in his firm but Jesus was spending the precious days of his short life with them. They had been called by Jesus to witness his miracles and to hear his teachings and to experience his friendship. The talent they were each getting was learning that Jesus was the Son of God and having their hearts and eyes opened to faith in Jesus. Tom Long says, "The treasure entrusted to them...this treasure is the gospel—the teachings of Jesus." Each disciple was getting that investment– and each of them must decide what to do with it.

That is a different read on the text when we all thought it was about how much money we should to pledge to GPC for the 2023 stewardship campaign. But when you think about it, Jesus did not have to face paying staff salaries, or maintaining aging buildings, or buying soap for the women's bathroom. Jesus was focused on getting people to believe that he loved his friends enough to die for them. Jesus was focused on making people know that their sins, any sins they had committed could be forgiven. Jesus was focused on loving people and opening their hearts and minds to God's presence in the world. This parable cannot be about the church budget season because Jesus did not care about budgets or raising money. Jesus was talking about what they were going to do with something far more valuable than money – what were they going to do with their faith and the blessings Jesus had given to them? There is a lesson in this story about how to receive and treat and handle with our faith– two got it right and one got it wrong.

Now we need to take a commercial break for a minute...because I just popped the balloon and told you that this text is not about stewardship even though it is tempting to make it one. So before I return and to the regularly programed sermon and tell you how to avoid the weeping and gnashing

of teeth situation, I need to tell you that the church needs everyone to make a pledge this year. Jesus didn't run a budget, but I do! And COVID was not easy on the finances at GPC. The last two years we ran a deficit budget, and we can't keep doing that. Last year only 40% of our membership pledged to the church. We want to grow our church and we are seriously committed to doing more to with our mission partners who desperately need our support. We need to increase the reach of this congregation as more and more churches are falling to the wayside. So please today or this week fill out that card you get in the mail or that is in your pew and sign up to support our work. THANK YOU! Now back to the sermon...

My friend was at her granddaughter, June's third birthday party and one of the guests, knowing full well how old the girl was asked the question, "So how old are you, June?" Without missing a beat, the freshly minted three-year-old replied, "I'm almost four!" It is all about perspective.

I wonder if Jesus is trying to make a point about perspective in this parable. Each of the three slaves was given something significant and they had to decide what to do with it. One perspective is just, "I have been given this thing and I guess I better hold onto it, hide it under the mattress or bury it in the ground." Another perspective is just, "I have been given something precious and valuable and I better use it wisely and creatively and hopefully." Jesus needs them to have the right perspective about what they had been given. The disciples are learning from Jesus and then Jesus is going to go away. He is going to entrust him with the talents and then they are going to have to figure out what to do with their Christian faith in the meantime.

We all must figure out what to do with our faith in the meantime. If you learned about Jesus, if you have some belief in God, if you have some sense that this world is not all there is for us – then you are going to have to figure out what to do with those things. You can just hold onto those things and bury them in the sand, but your faith will not grow – at best it will just sit there – at worst it will get covered in dust and dirt and you might even forget where you buried it. Or you can try to grow that faith, take pride in that faith, add depth and purpose and practice to that faith, and then you can do your very best to share that faith with others.

Jesus needed those disciples to take their talents and make the most of them. And we know they did not all heed the lesson...some of them did. We know lots about what Peter did after Jesus died but what did Thaddeus do? We know that Thomas got over his doubts and spread the gospel in India, but Judas flaked out. Some of the disciples were like the first two slaves who took their talents, and they ran with them. They took the life-changing experience of meeting Jesus and they lived into it. We have a choice to make with what to do with our faith.

In the middle of Mary Oliver's poem, *Sometimes*, she writes:

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

Somehow in this parable Jesus is trying to communicate something to the disciples about how to live a life of faith. Take that talent of faith you have been given and use it – believe you have gifts to share and a story to tell and love to offer the world. Be imaginative and creative and hopeful – build up your character to be worthy of the one who sent you into the world and called you his own. Faith is not to be dormant – the knowledge that God has loved you and forgiven you and sent you is a powerful gift that should shoot us into the world like a canon.

The slaves who did the right thing were not the ones who waited passively. They were waiting for the master to return but in the meantime, they were out in the world making a difference. Instead of this being a stewardship text I fear it might be a more disturbing text about what Christians do or do not do with the faith they have been given.

None of us know how longer we have until we will meet Jesus. We will go to him, or he will come to us – either way, when we meet Jesus, we want to hear those words, “Well done, good and faithful one.” So use what you got – the time you have, the faith you have, the love you have – use those things wisely. Go into the world in peace and have courage for the things you must face. Pay attention and be astonished and then tell other people about it. Do not fall into despair but be hopeful about the future. Continue the work and the mission of Jesus. Do not be afraid because the Savior of the world entrusted you with a calling of significance.

Now is not the time to give up and bury your treasure. Now is not the time to pull back and wait for someone else to do something. Now is not the time to look around and feel jealous of what other people have going for them. Now is the time to grow your faith – one becomes two and two become four and four become a life of faithful discipleship. The mustard seeds of faith planted within your heart in church, in Sunday school, from the Bible, from the saints of the church – do not let them go to waste. You are a spiritual being with a measure of faith planted within you – that is the biggest gift you could have been given – the question is what will you do with that talent?

Amen.