

Matthew 25:14-30 (ESV)

The Parable of the Talents

¹⁴“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. ¹⁵To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. ¹⁷So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ ²¹His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²²And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ ²³His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Nothing Is as It Seems

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: November 13, 2005

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Matthew 25:14-30*

This morning Jesus introduces us to the world of investment banking. Of the kingdom of heaven he says, it is like a man going on a journey who entrusts his money to his servants. To one he gives one five talents, to another two talents and to the third one talent. Now, five talents doesn't sound like much. And certainly one talent sounds like a small sum. But a little investigation into ancient currency reveals that a talent was a lot of money, something like \$600,000 in today's currency. The story sounds a little more dramatic, doesn't it? The man entrusts the first servant with 5 talents, or \$3 million, the second with \$1.2 million, and the third with well over half a million.

The three servants handle the situation thus. The first took his \$3 million and traded with it, and he turned it into \$6 million. The second traded with his \$1.2 million and turned it into \$2.4 million. The third servant, scared to death at the idea of being responsible for so much money, dug a hole and buried it. The man returns. The first servant presents his \$5 million. The man congratulates the first servant and brings him into the inner circle. The second servant presents his \$2.4 million. The man congratulates the second servant and brings him into the inner circle. But the third servant says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." The man took the money from third servant, gave it to the others, and cast the third servant into the outer darkness where there is gnashing of teeth.

It turns out that not only were the good servants entrusted with the money; in the end they were actually given it as their own, along with the money from the third servant. The point seems clear enough. God gives us wealth and tells us, Get out there and see how much more you can make with it. It is good and right to make good investments and increase your wealth. That's what God put us here to do. Plain as day. God will reward us if we work the free-market system, and God will actually punish us if we don't. I guess it's true that God helps those who help themselves.

Even fairly early in Christian history something like this was the common interpretation. In fact, some early interpreters were sure this is what the parable meant, but they thought it was a little harsh on the third servant. The now lost, *The Gospel of the Nazoraeans*, a later and non-canonical gospel, tells the story a little differently. In that telling, one servant multiplied talents and was rewarded, the second buried the talents and was rebuked, and the third squandered his talent on harlots and drink and was cast into prison. Clearly, the story is changed along the way to better fit our moral sensibilities. It's a little kinder to the servant who buried the money, even as the point is confirmed that free-market investment banking is the one sure-fire way into the kingdom of heaven.

As you may have guessed by now, this whole line of interpretation is not actually what

Jesus had in mind. His original story is more interesting, more complex, and more meaningful than the superficial. And as always, Jesus' intent is to challenge our accepted ways of thinking, not confirm them. He takes us down a path that we think we know, but then we find out we've ended up somewhere entirely different from where we thought we were going.

So, let's back up and look a little more carefully at the story, and see where Jesus is actually taking us..

Let's imagine Jesus' audience. Most of them were workers, poor folk. They would have identified with the servants in the story. In those days especially, they, also, would not have had much affection for extremely wealthy property owners. Their wealth always came at the expense of others. The Biblical commentator Bernard Scott tells us, that in fact, "It's most likely that Jesus' original audience would have initially identified most strongly with the third servant. Thus, Jesus' conclusion to this story would have been a shocker."

Jesus is telling a story in which all of his listeners would have thought of the property owner in just the way the third servant did: a hard man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he scattered no seed.

Jesus, then, is bringing his listeners up short in the first instance very early in the story. Property owners that Jesus' audience knew never would have given their servants huge sums of money to care for. Jesus is announcing to his hearers that God is very unlike most wealthy property owners. God is generous. God has given to his servants great wealth.

But then his listeners are yanked about again. If we've got this new image of a generous property owner, if God is generous, why was the third servant punished for burying his money? Here we must be particularly careful about getting ahead of ourselves, about reading into the story what we think the story means. Is the third servant's problem that he didn't obey the property owner's instructions to become a good investment banker? Is the meaning that God entrusts us generously, and we are to multiply what we have? Or is the meaning that if we are not obedient to what God requires of us, we will be cast into the outermost darkness? Actually, it will be hard to deduce these lessons from the parable. In the story the property owner gives the servants no instructions whatsoever. He doesn't say, "Invest wisely." He doesn't say, "Here is my commandment." He doesn't say, "Do thus and so." He just gives them his property and goes away.

The question only becomes more pressing. If there were no instructions of what to do with the money, then why did the property owner punish the third servant? Let's look at the interaction between the property owner and the third servant. The answer seems to be in the servant's attitude toward the property owner. The third servant comes up to the property owner, and before the owner says a word, the servant says, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed,²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground." Immediately the property owner responds, but notice that he responds with a rhetorical question. The owner says, "You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed?" The property owner is saying, "You knew that I reap where I have not sowed and gather where I scattered no seed? You know that's who I am, do you?" The owner then banishes the servant to the darkness, essentially fulfilling the servant's expectation. The question is, Was the servant banished because the owner was a hard man, or did the owner become a hard man simply in response to, simply fulfilling the servant's expectation? All the evidence in the story suggests the owner is generous. Ironically, only to the

servant who feared him was the owner a hard man.

It appears that the man's fear creates its own reality. His fear leads to bad results. The point isn't so much about good investing, or even pleasing God for fear of punishment. Jesus is simply saying that being fearful of God actually gets in the way of responding well to God's generosity. Fear is its own worst enemy.

There is first of all a negative lesson, a warning here that even today goes largely unheeded. Anthony Robinson noted in 1993 in the "Christian Century," "If it is fear that may separate us from God and bring judgment, it is ironic that almost without exception those who speak about judgment today, those who employ the symbol of hell, play upon and heighten people's fears. Political leaders, too, have become adept at subtly appealing to our anxieties." If that was true in 1993, how much more is it true today. Fear is not the currency of God. It is the currency of the outermost darkness. Robinson concludes:

There is plenty of fear to go around. In the midst of recession and global economic change we often focus our anxiety on outsiders or the socially marginal - homeless people, immigrants, gays and lesbians, racial minorities. But the [anxious] impulse to heighten our own security will further diminish our common life. Perhaps we need to join [Jesus] in warning how great is the cost of living in fear. And perhaps we might also proclaim the grace and promise of living fully and freely for Christ's sake. (Ibid)

There is an old saying, "A life lived in fear is a life half-lived." According to Jesus that overestimates the quality of such a life by exactly one half. A life lived in fear is a life not lived at all.

What would it mean to live life fearlessly? What would it mean to respond to God's abundance without fearfully burying what we have? What would it mean to speak of God, not as a fearsome judge, but as our generous and gracious benefactor?

According to Jesus, it would be to be invited into a deep relationship of trust and into a willingness to take risks. Think of the things we sometimes say to ourselves in church. "So and so will be angry if we do this." "Don't rock the boat." "Let's hunker down and try to survive." "That's how we've always done it, and nobody's going change it." But Jesus tells this story to get us to say different things and ask different questions. He wants us always to turn away from the fearful thoughts by which we bury our very hope. He wants us always to be asking, "What does the Gospel ask of us? What does the Gospel require of us? What is the Gospel inviting us to do?" When we are guided fearlessly by these questions we become the church and a truly Christian people.

I think of Jesus' words to his disciples that we considered a few weeks ago: "Those who want to save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for my sake will find them." Isn't Jesus saying here again that life and love, even oneself and one's faith are lost if we try to hoard them, if we try to bury them? Isn't Jesus rather imploring us invest ourselves so that our faith our lives and the good news itself may prosper?

As our move to North Street in Medford becomes ever a closer reality, as we find ourselves given a new start and, auspiciously enough, five talents or \$3 million dollars to invest in our future, I dream of how we may answer the Gospel call.

I dream of the building at North Street with a new kitchen and accessible bathrooms, with refurbished Sunday School rooms and function space. I dream of computer equipment to

enhance worship and study groups. I dream of an accessible entrance and air conditioning. I dream of these things and more in service of our ministry of the Gospel. In service of the Gospel's inclusiveness and not a fearful distortion of it. In service of our ministry to those in the surrounding neighborhood and at Tufts. O I dream. I dream of the building pulsing with lively and life-transforming worship, and Bible studies, and social events, and mission. I dream of a new day for us. I dream that in the days to come it will be said of us, "They went forth in joy and without fear. They invested the riches that God gave them in the work of Gospel. And the fruits of their labors multiplied beyond imagination. I dream they may say, Well done, good and faithful servant.

In this morning's parable it was the property owner who went on a journey. In our story, it is we who are traveling. But the point of it all remains. We are called to live out the Gospel with a glad heart and a fearless boldness. May it be so. Amen.