

Matt 25:14-30 The parable of the Talent Nov. 20, 2011

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This gospel from Matthew has bothered me this week b/c I wasn't quite sure what to do with it! I've preached on this passage before, but it's a difficult one to understand. The parable seems to be easy to follow, and yet, as I studied more about what things mean within the text, I sorta' didn't want to preach it. It's one of the moments where I finally sat down to write my sermon and said (pardon my language), "Oh crap! What the heck is Jesus up to this time?" Maybe you don't really want to hear one of your pastors admit that, but I'm trying to be honest, just as the servants were honest to their master about what they did with the talents that were given to them. Jesus' words are so confusing, if not challenging.

That's part of the problem – our understanding of what talents actually are. I hear the word, talents, and automatically assume it's talking about our gifts – the things we are good at – and if it were only about that, well then, THAT would be an easy sermon to preach. I could talk to you about your gifts and how we, as a church of Christ, need to use your gifts for God's work. Well, I do hope that you know that you are a part of Christ's church today. I DO hope that you know that you are able to use your gifts to further the kingdom of God. But this is not the first and foremost thing in the gospel text for today b/c a talent does not equal something that we are good at or a gift. A talent equals a certain amount of money – a boatload of money, actually, by anyone's standards.

A talent was a coin that was the largest denomination of currency in the first-world system. We could translate it as a large amount of solid gold or a large corporation CEO's bonus or a-winning-the-lottery amount. Only the strong could actually pick up a talanton, which might weigh 50-75 pounds. Each was worth about 6,000 denarii, which today would probably be more than most of us would earn in twenty-five years or worth twenty flasks of pure nard (perfume) that Mary used on the feet of Jesus.* This amount would make anyone's mouth drop open, and that is what the master was giving to his servants – 5 talents, 2 talents and 1 talent – more money than they could ever imagine.

So, in some ways, regarding our current economic situation, we too might be like the 3rd servant and bury the money we were given. That way, we would know that we would at least have that much. If we were to invest it in today's market, we don't know what would happen. If we were to invest it in buying property, how do we know it won't lose its value? Heck, maybe it would be like taking the money and making a trip to the casino and seeing what happens with it or buying a bunch of lottery tickets – we don't know.

It would be easier if we could adjust the parable so that it makes more sense to us. There's a later apocryphal version that tells it differently: The first servant invests the money (when the markets were safe) and the money increases; the second servant hides and preserves it; the third servant squanders it on riotous living. So, when the third servant is punished, we, as listeners could applaud because that's the way it should be in the world. It's easier to understand. But that's not the way that Jesus tells the parable – there must be something more to it.

Again, as a reminder to hearing Jesus' parables, we have to be careful not to get caught up in the details. Whether five, two, or one talent was received, one talent was a lot of money and it was never the servant's money – it belonged to the Master! Isn't that true – all that we have belongs to God? Yet, to put another twist on it, what if Jesus wasn't just talking about what we do with our money? What if Jesus was also using it as an illustration for something worth so much more to us? It was an abundant, extravagant giving of God's grace.

If the talent is the gospel itself, the good news (faith), then it's not something that we bury to keep safe and protect. It is something to be expressed in love, as a gift to other people because it is from the Master!

What if the servants themselves aren't individual believers? We get suckered into thinking of our own, self-sufficient life with God and that God gives us talents. But these servants could represent the church, a corporate body to which the gospel/good news has been entrusted.

Why was the third servant judged so harshly? He was afraid and being afraid, in the gospel of Matthew, is equivalent to having no faith. He claimed to know the mind of the master and the master was angry at this – we cannot know the mind of God. He didn't think enough of himself. The Master gave him a part of all he had – a talent, according to his abilities – and the third servant didn't think he could do anything with it, so he turned it into being about himself and the talent into something fragile that needed to be protected.

The way we see God has a lot to do with the way we approach the world – with an open hand or a closed fist (Henri Nouwen). And, if we're honest, the way we handle our money. Yet the faith we have isn't fragile because it isn't made by human hands, but given by God. God gives us life and says, "Dive in! Receive and accept the gift of my love through my Son, Jesus Christ. Now, pass it on and watch it multiply and watch it spread. Share what you have been given, because it ultimately belongs to me."

We don't know what will happen when we share the good news of Christ – God's love. WE have no control over what someone does when they hear it. The only assumption we can make is that it needs to be heard.

In the parable told by Jesus, the master gave no clear instructions on what the servants were to do with the talents given to them. So today I ask you, the congregation, the corporate body of Christ, how will you use the time, gifts, and money that have been entrusted to you? And, more importantly, what will you do with the good news of Jesus given to you?

Works Cited

*Howell, J. (2005, November 1). Trojan Horse. *The Christian Century* , p. 19.