

What You See is What You Get

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on November 15, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

[Jesus said,] For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time, the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so, I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy servant! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest. So, take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 25:14-30, NRSV)

They say that familiarity breeds contempt. While I doubt that our familiarity with certain Bible stories leads us to hate them, I'm sure it stands in the way of us understanding them in a deeper way. Because we've heard a story so many times, we may feel that we already have it figured out and that there's nothing more to learn. But over a lifetime spent wrestling with the Bible, I can assure you that's never, ever the case!

That's especially true today with this familiar parable of Jesus. There are few Bible passages which have been so universally misunderstood as this one. It doesn't help that the unit of money used in the parable is a "talent," which lends itself easily to the casual interpretation

that this story teaches us that we have a responsibility to use the gifts, the talents, God has given us.

Now, of course, this is *true* – we *should* use our God-given “talents” to their full potential in service to God and the world. But Jesus is saying much, much more than this here. That simple reading is far too *tame* for what Jesus has in mind.

But the misunderstandings don’t stop there. People have seen this parable as biblical support for the financial industry or Wall Street, or as divine approval for the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

That said, the Parable of the Talents *is* a story about investments – wise and not so wise. Most of all, it’s a story of how we view God and how that view shapes what we *do* with the gospel treasure we’ve been given and how willing we are to take risks with it.

In this story, a master going on a journey summons his servants and entrusts his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, “to each according to his ability.” He then went away.

When I was a kid, I imagined the first being handed a five-dollar bill, the second a two-dollar bill, and the third a one dollar bill. Understandable, but *way off*! The master *truly does* entrust his property to them, for a “talent” was a unit of value equal to about 6000 denarii. Since one denarius was a common laborer's daily wage, a *single* talent would be roughly equivalent to 20 years’ wages for the average worker! *Five* talents, the largest amount entrusted to any of the servants, was comparable to about one hundred years’ worth – more than a lifetime’s worth – of labor, an enormous amount of money!

And so, with the Master away, the one who receives the five talents goes off at once and trades with them, and makes five more talents. In the same way, the one who receives the two talents makes two more talents. But the one who received the one talent goes off and digs a hole in the ground and hides his master’s money.

Later, after an extended period of time, the Master returns. He summons his servants, and the first two reveal that they doubled their master’s investment, both being commended with the same warm words: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”

These first two are called “good and trustworthy” because they set out immediately to work with the treasure entrusted to them. In Matthew’s Gospel, this “treasure” is the gospel itself – the teachings and message of Jesus – and these two represent all wise and faithful disciples who hear Jesus’ words and act on them.

Now here, don’t let a simple detail get past you. Doubling one’s fortune is no small thing. It requires diligence, and it requires *risk*. Small risks lead to small rewards, and big risks have the

potential to yield big rewards. These two servants must have felt secure in their master's love and trust to risk the enormous sums given them to manage. That love and trust made them strong enough to be courageous.

But not so with the third servant. He takes the talent and buries it. He isn't willing to take the chance. That way, he figures, he couldn't get punished for losing the funds entrusted to him. At least, he could return the master's treasure intact. At least, he won't come out *worse* in the end.

But why does he do this? Why is he so afraid? Why is he so unwilling to take a risk, even with less, whereas the others aren't? His words to the master reveal the answer:

Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so, I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours (Matthew 25:24-25, NRSV).

Now, I ask you: To this point in the parable, is there any basis at all for seeing the master this way? *Absolutely not*. Far from being harsh, the master acts generously, trusting even this third servant with the wealth of *twenty years'* wages. Far from "reaping what he did not sow," he returns to the first two servants' oversight the wealth that they earned and, even more importantly, invites them into "his joy," transforming his relationship with them from master/servant to that of *family*.

The first two servants feel the freedom to take risks because they see their master as the trusting, welcoming, generous, benevolent person he is. But the third servant is only able to see a harsh, uncaring tyrant, and driven by fear, his actions follow – which turns the parable in a tragic direction. In the end, the third servant pronounces his own judgment. He sees the master as only his tiny, warped vision allows him to see. And what he sees determines his destiny. What he sees is what he gets.

This story, then, is ultimately about how we see God and rooted in that, what we do with the gospel treasure that has been entrusted to us. So, when we look towards the God we say we believe in, towards the God we say we trust, what *do* we see?

Do we see a God who loves all the people that we love, and hates (or at least really dislikes) all the people we fear and hate?

Do we see a God who is a stern stickler for believing all the right things, which of course are our own beliefs?

Do we see a God whose apparent purpose in existing is to stand by quietly until called upon, in those times when we find ourselves in a mess?

Do we see a God who is the ultimate guarantor and protector of our own interests, our own way of life?

At the end of the day, do we see a God who really looks a lot like *us*?

Almost 70 years ago, the Anglican clergyman J.B. Phillips wrote his short but wonderful classic *Your God is Too Small*, in which he urges us to ask hard questions of ourselves and to recognize that our vision of God is invariably far, far too small ... far too limited ... and most importantly, far too little like Jesus. And as we saw in the parable, that has consequences for what we do with the gospel given to us – and our times *need* that gospel now.

Today in our country we are witnessing two great waves of anger and fear and bitterness crashing up against each other, without ceasing. We see a nation more divided than ever before. Dire visions of America's future, which once may have sounded alarmist, may not be so unrealistic after all.

Families have been divided. Friendships have been strained or even broken. If you listen to the rhetoric, you might imagine that half of us are communist baby-killers and the other half are fascist, racist homophobes. And hurtful words once spoken, cannot be taken back.

And our political leadership has largely fanned the flames of this division, rather than even attempt to unite us, when division is a better electoral strategy.

This fear, this hate, this division is unsustainable. It will, unchecked, lead to suffering and death. It will lead to our own sad version of the "outer darkness," where there is "weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This is where the gods who are too small would lead us –
The small god of only people who think like me ...
The little god who is the defender of my self-interests ...
The puny god who tells me that of course I'm right ...
The weakling god who longs to "own" my opponents.

These "gods" have no power to save ... no power to heal ... no power to soften hearts ... no power to free us to embody something worthy of being called "Good News."

This is why it's time for we who confess Jesus – we of diverse and even opposing views – to clear our eyes and to see aright the One who has gifted us with the good news of the gospel, the God who has given us a sacred trust to share with each other and with a world that so desperately needs it.

So, let us lift up our eyes and see afresh the God of the Bible ... the God of all Creation ... the God of Jesus Christ ... the God who will have no other gods before Him, least of all the small gods of our imaginations.

As the Apostle Paul put it, may we not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of our minds ... renewed in the truth of who God really is, for this God that the Gospel proclaims is –

The God of unbounded Love ...

The God of Amazing Grace ...

The God whose Power and Wisdom is revealed in the Cross ...

The God who resists the proud, and lifts up the lowly ... who defends the cause of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed ...

The God of Justice and Joy, Compassion and Peace!

And as our minds are so renewed and our vision expanded, as we turn from the small gods of our own making and see God for who God is, we must *know* that we *can* take the risk of Love. We *can* risk stepping out of our own echo chambers and see our neighbors as God sees them: as those for whom Christ died, as those who are precious and beloved.

I know this isn't easy. Clinging to our small gods is a tough habit to break, made much harder by the fact that the fear and hate out there – and sometimes in here – are all too real. People make it hard. *We* can make it hard. The air we breathe is polluted. Lies are spread and believed, poisoning us against each other. Loyalty to Truth is easily surrendered to the lust for Power.

And so, for us this struggle must be about so much more than the politics of the moment. We must know it to be a struggle of the *spirit*, in which our struggle is to remain *human* ... to remain true to one another ... to remain faithful to the Gospel with which we have been entrusted. And be sure of this: This is one battle we cannot fight with the tired, worn-out weapons of small gods, for as Martin Luther King wisely taught us, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only Light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only Love can do that."

In these days, may we ever be a people of the Light. May we ever be a people of Love. May we as a church be an *intentional, alternative* community in which we love and care for one another in the face of our own differences. And as such a community, may we – with grace, humility, and persistence – invest in the lives of our neighbors, and accept the risks, because we know that we all are being held together in the universal, overflowing love of God.

To the glory of God! Amen.