

Matthew 25:14-30

Lexington Presbyterian Church
Lexington, Virginia
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A Reality Check
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As I prepared for this sermon I said to myself, “What a great parable for Stewardship Dedication Sunday.” All a preacher has to do is to point to that no-count servant who sat on his talent, never increased his pledge, and ended up on the doorstep of hell.

Now, before any of you go to change your pledge commitment to the church, we might want to take another look at this familiar parable. It is not as straightforward as it may seem. The lectionary says the parable begins with verse 14. Actually, the parable begins when Jesus says in verse one, “The kingdom of heaven will be like this.” He then tells three parables about life in God’s heavenly kingdom. This is the second in the string of three.

Each parable has a dreamlike quality. In a dream, a picture comes to mind that looks perfectly normal. Then, without warning, someone enters the dream, or something happens beyond reality. The same is true in each of these parables. Each kingdom parable invites us to ask, “What is real?”

Today’s parable begins innocently enough. A master distributes his capital to three servants before leaving on a long trip. One servant receives 5 talents, another 2, and another 1. On first reading, the parable sets up a natural sympathy for the one-talent servant. After all, he has received the least and what is a person to do with so little? This is the point where the English language misses the character of this parable. The word “talent” is English for a Greek term meaning: a huge sum of money. One talent would equal the amount of money a laborer in Jesus’ day would earn for twenty years of work. Each servant receives a different quantity, but all three servants are asked to oversee substantial amounts.

The dreamlike character of this parable begins even earlier, for what capitalist would give this amount of money to anyone to oversee without one word of instruction? And, what kind of person would bury such a huge amount of money in the ground? Surely, they would, at least, invest in the Jerusalem Federal Savings Bank around the corner.

If this parable is not about how Christians should be faithful over their few talents, financial or otherwise, then what is it about? The parable of the talents is a reality check on the nature of God and how we respond to God’s nature.

Each servant oversees their portfolio in different ways. Two do so at considerable risk. After all, you don’t double any investment, in any economy, without taking a substantial risk. One servant oversees the investment with extreme caution.

Years go by, and the master finally does return. Soon, it’s time to review the books. The two servants holding the most capital are commended for their wise investments. The one-talent servant

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returns the capital intact. He then cites his reason for cautious care of the funds. In terms that are unfortunately too familiar today, the one-talent servant blames the master for his failure to have made even a modest return. Douglas Hare of PTS says, “The servant’s master is a harsh and savage businessman, a sharp dealer who extracts far more from a business transaction than is his proper due.” The one-talent servant sees the master’s trust as a thinly disguised trap to make him fail and be punished. As the parable ends, his worst fears come true.

This dreamlike parable invites us to ask, “What is real?” In the parable fear paralyzes the one-talent servant. He can never see himself only as a recipient of his master’s considerable trust. The one-talent servant sees himself only as a victim of a master who never wanted him to succeed.

Fear also paralyzes the church. And where fear dominates the church, the blame is affixed, behavior is critically audited, money is begrudgingly given, and it is hawkishly watched with a discerning eye.

Where fear is the principal reality for the individual Christian, we protest, “My gifts are too small to matter,” or “I’m tired of giving so much of myself when others don’t pull their weight,” or “I’ll only give when I am shown precisely where my money goes,” or “I only hear from the church when they need my money.”

In the parable, only one servant is paralyzed by fear. Two servants accept the master’s truth with gladness and gratitude. Where gratitude dominates the church, forgiveness is extended, doors are opened to people different from us, new ideas are welcomed, money is given freely and is entrusted to the wise use of those in its charge.

Where gratitude is the principal reality for the individual Christian, we respond, “Thanks be to God for the privilege to give, for the talents yet untapped, and for those leaders who faithfully use my gifts and talents to the glory of God and in the service of God’s people.” John Calvin said, “The right stewardship is tested by our love: The love of God and the love of neighbor. We are called to be stewards in everything we do.”

Earl Palmer, honorably retired and former pastor of University Presbyterian Church in Seattle, Washington, writes that there are three critical elements in skiing downhill:

- 1. You need to aim your body down the fall line.*
- 2. You need to keep your weight on the downhill ski.*
- 3. You need to go fast.*

He explains, “If your body is not aimed down the fall line you cannot turn effectively. If your weight is not on the downhill ski, you will catch the edge and fall. If you have no speed, you will force your weight around and likely fall. You need to master all these elements to race effectively. The problem is that all three run counter to our instinct of self-preservation. All three seem contrary to reason and good sense. Yet any skier knows that without these you cannot ski well.”

Likewise, Palmer says, the same applies to our Christian giving. “It runs counter to our instincts,

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giving us an insecure feeling that we will fall short in other areas. But the reality in giving, like skiing, is that when we tithe the opposite is true. Instead of falling on our faces, we actually begin to move with freedom down life's slope, enjoying the gift of the moment rather than living anxiously in the uncertainty of changing conditions."

—luthersem.edu/stewardship/resource

Will we be guided by fear, or will we be guided by gratitude? As you have seen and heard throughout this Stewardship season we are called to be living stones for God's kingdom. We are invited to invest in our future. And as you well know, the future is now.

Will you be guided and paralyzed by fear, or will you be guided by gratitude?

On this side of God's kingdom, gratitude and fear live side by side. Some even argue that the parable is nothing more than a dream. Ours is the real world where people take advantage of our generosity, where "them that has, get more," and where any charity there is, needs to start and to stay at home.

Maybe they're right. Maybe we can do no more than look at this parable and sadly say the one-talent servant did the right thing. God knows there is much to fear in this life, and the one-talent servant knew it.

Maybe Jesus offers us a dreamlike view of reality. Jesus gives us the spectacles in order that we may view the world for what it is and for the way in which God created it to be. Not gray and gloomy and fearful, but the beautiful spectrum of colors that God created it to be for us to live in harmony with each other.

The reality of being a Christian is that we live in a world where fear does not rule, but where gratitude reigns. In the Christian world, we respond gladly and joyously to the goodness of God. Christians joyously give more of themselves than makes good sense. They embrace all that they have and all that they are as sacred trusts from God.

Interestingly, the faithful two who doubled their investments didn't get higher salaries or gold watches or plaques to put on their walls. They got 2 things: First, they got more responsibility. *You have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things.* The reward for taking the risk and managing the investment was the burden of greater risk and the challenge of larger investments. But with the responsibility came a second reward: the joy of the master's presence.

And the punishment of the 3rd servant? He loses 2 things: the responsibility of being a steward and the joy of the master's presence. To the one choosing security over risk, the Lord remains a hard master. Fear only breeds more fear. The prospect of joy and the freedom of response are gone. But those who risk discover a God ready to share the delight of his presence and participation in the mission.

The parable of the talents offers us a reality check: Are we going to live principally in fear or principally in gratitude? Are we willing to follow Jesus into the dreamlike real world of the kingdom

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of God? Are we going to be guided by fear, or are we going to be guided by gratitude? The choice is ours to make today.

Sources:

Hare, Douglas R. A. *Matthew*, Interpretation Series p. 287, John Knox Press 1993.

The message is from sermons that I preached over the years that I have been in the pastorate. I have compiled them from the notes I made before they were preached. I do not know where I found some of the material contained here. I may have borrowed it, as a whole or in part, from others. I simply do not remember. If this is the case, I apologize right now, and that our combined efforts will glorify God.