

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Good and Faithful Servant"

Scripture: Matthew 25:14-30, Psalm 90

Hymns: Morning has broken #814, Open my eyes that I may see #500, God, whose giving knows no ending #663, Praise: Forever, Cry of my heart, Open the eyes of my heart, Open our eyes, Lord

Adapted from PCC "Legacy Giving Sunday 2017 Worship Resource"

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A parable is a simple story used to teach
or illustrate a truth

that is not immediately understood by the audience
or the reader.

Today's Gospel lesson is often referred to

as the parable of the talents,

though some translations call it the parable
of the bags of gold.

So what does Jesus want to teach us?

And how does it relate to today's theme of legacy?

PAUSE

In today's story,

the master gives three servants some property
to manage on his behalf.

We are told he gives one servant five talents,

another two and another one,

"each according to their ability."

When the master returns,

he is quite pleased that two servants took their talents
and multiplied them, returning double to the master.

The master is pleased with the first two servants,

but he is disappointed with the third,

the servant who was given one talent
and buried it in the ground.

Now at first read, you might think this parable
is about growing your money.

Sometimes it is used at financial planning

and wealth management seminars

to encourage the up-building

and accumulation of possessions and wealth.

It's maybe easy to understand why.

Sometimes people look past the money

and focus on the idea that people should work hard

to use their God-given talents, skills and abilities

and make a better life for themselves

and those around them.

It is easy to understand this 'reading' too.

But both of these interpretations fail to capture

The fullness of this parable.

Let's explore for ourselves and discover what Jesus is really talking about.

The Greek word for talent is *talanton*.

It has two equal meanings:

that which is weighed,

and a sum of money

used by ancient Romans and Greeks.ⁱ

Jewish sources explain that the word for talent is *kikkar*.ⁱⁱ

It was worth about 3000 silver coins

and weighed approximately 95 pounds.

A *kikkar* is the largest unit of weight in the Bible.

A single talent would be equal to

15 years of earnings for a laborer.

To give you a better sense
of the kind of money we are talking about,
the average Canadian earned about \$50,000 in 2016ⁱⁱⁱ.

If we call this one year of labor and multiply it by 15,
The 'modern' value of one talent would be \$750,000.

All to say that in the world in which Jesus lived and preached,
a single talent was a weighty sum of money.

The servants who received two and five talents
received today's equivalent of \$1.5 million
and \$3.75 million respectively.

The servant who received only one talent,
Was given just a measly \$750,000!

So, not only is the text talking about money,
it's the kind of money
that most of us will never accumulate in a lifetime.

PAUSE

What if you were given such a sum of money?
What would you do with it?

Would you put it in the stock market,
trying to double it?
Or maybe buy a home to renovate,
flip and double the original investment?

Would you go to the casino?
Or put the money in your savings account?
Or would you hide it in a coffee can in the freezer?

Well the third servant buried his money in the ground.
And the master was **furious** with him.

He called him lazy.
He scorned him and shunned him
for keeping that money safe.

I'm not sure why he isn't more empathetic.
I don't know about you,
but I'd have been pretty cautious
if I were asked to look after \$750,000
on behalf of someone else.

How else could I guarantee it wouldn't be lost?

Sure, I could have put it in the bank,
But the most I'd make is a couple of percentage points.
And what would that mean to the master, Mr. Goldbags?
By all accounts he is exceedingly rich?

So why such a scolding if this parable
isn't about financial gain or financial success?

There are at least two important details in the story
that can help us out.

First, we are told each servant was given the money
according to their abilities.

All to say that the master may have known
that the first and second servant would take more risk,
that they had entrepreneurial spirits,
and experience in making money.

And he would have likely known
that even though the third servant was more cautious,
that it was possible for him to do something
with the money.

At the very least the servant could have
Put the talent in the bank and earned a little interest.

But what did he do?

He put it in the ground.

Burying it in the ground was a denial, a denial
Of the responsibility that the master had given him
To make something out of the opportunity.

The second thing we learn
is that the third servant sees the master as “a harsh man”.

Perhaps this is also key.

The third servant only saw bad things about the master
and he was fearful.
He didn't see the master's abundance or generosity,
only judgment and wrath,

and so he didn't recognize the generosity of the master,
nor the freedom and opportunity the master was giving him,
nor the opportunity to share in the master's joy.

Noting these important details
We can begin to see that this parable
Is not just about working hard or growing your money,
But is about God's generosity and our opportunity
To devote ourselves to God's purposes.

And it asks the question...

Will we be faithful stewards
and put the resources God has given us
to work helping others?

Or will we let our fear of scarcity,
and our need for financial security,
cause us to deny that God has given us anything?

The accumulation of possessions
makes us feel safe and secure,
and may even provide meaning for our lives.

But the truth is, building up our wealth

and buying more stuff for the sake of it,
even if it was “earned” by our hard labor,
is as good as burying our talents in the ground.

Jesus' parable is about creating a different world.
It's about experiencing the extravagant generosity of God
And devoting ourselves to this gracious God's purposes.

Set in the context of the rest of Jesus' teaching,
We recognize this lesson about God's generosity
Exists in tandem a calling to sharing our resources
So that others may experience God's love.

We are called to use our treasures to feed the hungry,
clothe the poor, offer shelter to the homeless
treat others with the same grace
and unearned kindness
that God has shown to us.

Part of doing God's work and stewarding generosity
is being responsible to the people in our lives:
children, parents, friends.

We should take care of those closest to us.

But we should also recognize
that there are opportunities to do even more.
That there is enough for all.

Let me share with you a couple stories about Presbyterians
who have used their resources
while they were alive and in their deaths
to create legacies that continue God's mission.

Several years ago, George Van Beek gave a gift of stock
to the national church
to fund new experimental ministries.

George and his wife Evelyn
contributed to this fund during their lives,

and then left generous bequests in their wills.

These gifts have been making dreams come true
across the denomination.

One of these dreams was to change the world,
one bowl of soup at a time.

In 2013, Rebecca Sherbino and Colleen Graham
of Paris Presbyterian Church in Ontario
dreamed of hiring people on the margins:
people on social assistance;
people with various abilities and skills;
people who experienced significant
barriers to employment.

They would do this by making and selling healthy,
locally sourced, homemade soups and stews.

What was later named the Raw Carrot Soup Enterprise
received financial support from the legacy gifts
of generous Presbyterians.

And by mid-2015 The Raw Carrot was selling
about 100 liters of soup per week.

Maybe more importantly,
there are seven full-time staff
who would otherwise not have full employment.

Let me tell you about another living legacy.
A story from our own Presbytery: St. Giles' in Prince George.

A number of years ago the church
Received an offer from an anonymous benefactor
Who wanted to support family ministries in the church.

It was apparent to many
that St. Giles', like many other Presbyterian churches,
was aging.

Those people who were once incredibly active
Now had much less energy.
Young people were attending,
But they were busy with work and family.
And the middle demographic, the boomers,
Were few in number.

While some people were willing to sit on committees,
Few were willing to spearhead new initiatives.
And the pastor was already occupied with many other things.

Knowing this, the benefactor was interested in providing resources
To hire someone to be a point person in Family Ministry.

Money was set up in a trust,
And was dispersed in such a way to help cover
The bulk of the salary of a new part-time employee.

This gift has added new life to the church community.
There is now someone to provide leadership
For community-building events

like and intergenerational games nites,
or for community outreaches
like an interchurch vacation bible school.

What is more the trust will continue to provide funds
For up to 15 years.

Maybe you don't have the resources
To fund initiatives like these.
Maybe you've been given only a fraction of a talent.

But realise this...
In the hands of God's faithful and creative people
every gift given no matter how big or how small
has the ability to impact more lives

and carry out more of God's mission and ministry
than we could ever imagine.

I wonder how money and assets
From people in this community
Could transform our ministry here at St. Andrew's?

ⁱ Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker, A Greek-English Lexicon of the
New Testament (USA: University of Chicago Press) 2001.

May we put our 'talents' to work
And may we also hear these words of blessing:
"Well done good and faithful servant."

Amen.

ⁱⁱ Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (USA: Clarendon
Press, revised ed.) 1995; The Jewish Virtual Library – www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org;
and Chabad on-line - www.chabad.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Stats Canada