

Let Me Tell You a Story sermon series
The Parable of the Talents
Matthew 25:13-30
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We finish our sermon series today on the parables by looking at what is probably the most difficult parable to understand and make sense of in all the gospels. As I was doing my reading this week, one of the commentators of this story wrote, "'Welcome to one of the most difficult and contrary passages in our whole bible, one that, on its surface at least, is fraught with unattractive paradox.'" Nothing screams "this is going to be a great sermon" like the words "fraught with unattractive paradox." Feel free to start on your grocery lists, and when the music starts, you'll know I'm done.

Why is this parable so fraught? In most parables where there is a lord or master or authority figure, that person is the representative of God. Think of the father in the Prodigal Son story or the landowner who pays all the laborers the same wage, even though some only worked an hour. But in this story, the master is just...icky. He is described as a man of dubious character who makes his money off other people, and he punishes the slave who did the most prudent thing with what he was given by saving it. Is this how our God acts?

Our story today is usually thought of as thinly veiled allegory in which the master going on a journey is Jesus, who's about to depart from this earth and his disciples. In the story, when the master returns, we're told that he wants to "settle accounts" with his slaves. The belief back then was when Jesus came back to earth for the Final Judgment, he would settle accounts with all his believers to see how they lived out their faith in his absence. This parable tells us that those who have been fruitful will be rewarded by "entering the joy" of their master, but those who are not fruitful will be cast into the outer darkness. No pressure here, folks, but just in case today is THE day, let's all start looking really busy.

Let's look more closely at the challenge placed before the master's servants. Before he goes, the master entrusts to each slave a portion of money. There's no clear definition on the meaning of the word "talent" in this passage, but we do know it was a lot of money. Matthew could have easily said, "To one he gave a billion dollars, to one he gave a gazillion dollars, and to one he gave a millivannillion dollars." The point that Jesus is making is that the master is entrusting to his slaves something very precious and valuable, more than they could have ever imagined.

While the slaves aren't given any instructions on what to do with the money, we're told that the one given five talents and the one given two talents went off "at once," as if they understood the opportunity they had been handed. I remember the first time I saw big money. I was riding in the car with my grandma, and I told her I didn't believe there was such a thing as a hundred-dollar bill, at which point she opened her purse, took out a \$100, and let me hold it. I came so close to opening the car door and jumping out with the cash. I don't care that we were on the highway, for \$100 I'll take my chances!

The first two slaves also take their chances, and they are able to double the money. But not the third slave. Instead of working to increase the amount he was given, he does the prudent thing: he gets a mason jar, stuffs the money inside of it, and buries it in the backyard. And when the master returns, the third slave hands him exactly what he had been given, not a cent less, but also not a cent more. And for that, he is punished. You could easily argue that the third slave

didn't do anything wrong, and you'd be right, I guess. But you could also argue that he didn't do anything at all, which in this case is worse than doing something wrong.

Let's try to translate this parable into our modern context. First of all, let's name right up front that comparing Jesus to the master in this story has serious limitations. Yes, Jesus was going away and, yes, Jesus has given us gifts to us. But the master's response to the prudent slave doesn't mesh with my understanding of Jesus. The master is described as a harsh man with a dubious way of doing business and violent response to what some would call prudent financial management in uncertain times. That's not the Jesus I know, so we have to be careful about how far we push the allegory here. There must be someplace else Jesus wants us to focus besides the actions of the master.

Secondly, let's be clear: this parable is not about money. It's not an encouragement to make more money, because God knows no one in America needs to be encouraged to do that. Instead, the talents today most likely translate into the gifts we are given by our Master, who is God, and there's really no limit to what those gifts can be. Painting, administration, nurturing, investing, swinging a hammer, cooking a meal, running a meeting, rocking a crying child – all of these and many, many more are gifts we have been given by God to put to use.

And that's where the third servant gets himself into trouble. He practices what one commentator called "fearful inactivity." This is the kind of guy who wears a belt AND suspenders because he's afraid of being exposed. Instead of taking a risk to increase what he was given, he buries it. Instead of investing it and earning interest, he hoards it. Fear that something bad might happen kept him from making the most of his opportunity.

A few summers ago when I was in Alaska, I had a free afternoon and decided to sign up for ziplining. Doesn't that sound great? Ziplining in Alaska! Conveniently I forgot that I'm really afraid of heights. So, when I got there, I put on all my equipment and my guide said, "Good! Now climb that ladder." I said, "You mean that really tall one? Can't I just climb that step-ladder? He said, "Yeah, but that's not where the ziplines are." So I climbed the ladder to a platform about one gazillion feet off the ground. When I got there, the other guide said, "You made it! Now step out here to the edge of the platform so I can hook you up." I said, "Well, I can't do that." She said, "Why not?" I said, "Because that would require letting go of this tree trunk, and I'm not quite ready to do that." In our parable, the third slave is more content hugging the trunk instead of going out on a limb. Because he feared the master, he did nothing.

I don't believe in a God we have to fear. I believe in a God who loves us and wants to see us use our gifts to serve God. So, what are we afraid of? What keeps us from using the gifts we've been given? Maybe we feel like we don't have any special gift. Sure, we can do things, but they are just routine, they're not gifts. Notice in this story there's a man with five talents, a man with two talents, and a man with one talent. But there are no no-talent people in this story. You may think you skipped class on the day God was handing out gifts, but you have one. What are you passionate about? What fills you with joy? What do other people say you are good at? That's your gift.

When Sydney was younger, every time I would go on a trip, she would make me a little survival kit with instructions and tuck in my suitcase. It would include things like a quarter in case I got lost and needed to call someone, a mint in case I had to talk to someone and I had stinky breath, and a band-aid in case my arm fell off and I needed to put it back on. She packed my bag with the things I needed to survive. Before we were born, God packed our bags with what we needed, not just to survive, but to thrive. What did God pack in your bag?

Now, as this story reminds us, not everyone's gift is the same. Some may be more visible than others. I can stand up in front of people and prattle on, but I can't draw my way out of a paper bag. I know good folks who can cook delicious meals but make babies cry by just looking at them. Not all gifts are the same, but every gift matters, and every gift is meant to be used. As William Barclay wrote, "We are not all equal in talent, but we can be equal in effort."

Maybe we're afraid of using our gift because we think we'll use it wrong, or that our gift is so inconsequential that it doesn't matter, or that it won't make a difference, or that someone else's gift is a lot better than ours. To which Jesus says in his most loving, pastoral voice, "Get over it." At the end of our lives, when we settle our accounts with God, God won't ask us, "So, why weren't you more like Billy Graham? Why weren't you more like Desmond Tutu?" No, God will ask us, "So, why weren't you more like you?" God will say to me, "I created you to be Kory. I gave you gifts to be Kory. Why weren't you more like Kory?"

I understand not wanting to fail or do a bad job. No one likes to try and not succeed. But what this parable tells us is that the worst thing you can do is not try and fail; the worst thing you can do is not try at all. It's what Max Dupree calls the sin of unrealized potential. God has given you a gift. Your life. Your mind. Your abilities. Your body. Your passion. These are your gifts. And you are called to use these gifts to serve God, to provide God a return on the investment. Sure, we can use these gifts to serve ourselves. But that's not what they are meant for. If you are only building a reputation, or building your retirement portfolio, or building a collection to display, or building an investment account, then you are not building God's kingdom. You're only hugging the trunk.

You have been given a gift worth a bajillion dollars – the gift of your life. You have been entrusted with this gift by God and called to go out on a limb and use it to further God's kingdom. So, what will you do? Bury it because of fear? Not use it because you're too busy? Hide it away because you feel like it's not good enough? Our church needs ushers and greeters who can help us welcome people into our midst. Our congregation needs nursery volunteers and people to make meals for the sick and new moms. Our church needs people to lead ministry teams, to serve communion, to fix door handles, to count money. Do you have one of those gifts? Do you have some other gift that needs to be used?

My prayer for each of us is that our lives come as close as possible to realizing the potential that God has intended for us. But we're not going to get there by hugging the trunk. Sure, going out on a limb by using your gifts is a risk. But you'll never know how much you can accomplish for God until you try. Will God punish us if we don't use our gifts? I don't believe so. I believe we'll be punishing ourselves and those who could benefit from our gifts. You'll never hear God say to you, "Well done," unless you do something.