

Hugging the Trunk  
Matthew 25:14-30  
May 7, 2023  
Kory Wilcoxson

Yikes. That punishment seems a little harsh for someone who was just trying to be prudent, right? And by the way, what is “gnashing of teeth?” I went down a fun little rabbit hole this week trying to figure that out. As best as I can discern, it symbolizes constant and unbearable pain. A modern-day translation might say, “As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and the hitting of thumbs with hammers” or “the stepping on of Legos with bare feet.” You get the idea.

One commentator wrote about this parable, ““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,” but hang in there with me. I promise it will be less painful than stepping on a Lego.

Why is this parable so fraught? In most parables where there is an 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? No, it’s not, so right at the start, let’s agree that we’re not going to equate this ruthless master with God. There’s must be something else on which Jesus wants us to focus.

Let’s look more closely at the challenge placed before the servants. Before the master goes, he entrusts to each slave a portion of money. There’s no clear definition of 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 bajillion dollars, to one he gave a gadzillion dollars, and to one he gave a millivanillion 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,” probably to Keeleland, 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. So, 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 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, this

parable is about what we do with the talents we are entrusted. Today, those talents most likely translate into the gifts we are given by our Master, who is God, gifts that we are called to use to serve God and God's kingdom here on earth. We have gifts that are not meant to be hoarded, not meant to be squirreled away, but are meant to be 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 me to let 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, I'm betting more than one. Painting, administration, nurturing, investing, swinging a hammer, cooking a meal, running a meeting, rocking a crying child – these are all gifts we have been given. What are you passionate about? What fills you with joy? What do other people say you are good at? That's your gift.

In my last church, we had a sweet old lady named Pat Garlich. Pat was a life-long Disciple and was in church every Sunday if her health allowed. She wasn't in great shape, had a lot of health issues, and used a walker to get around. But Pat had one very important job – she is the person who brought the bread for communion each Sunday. And she took her job very seriously. If she knew she wasn't going to be in church, she would tell me a month beforehand and add weekly reminders to ensure there was communion bread on Sunday morning. There wasn't a lot that Pat could do, but she could purchase a \$3 loaf of bread and make sure it was on the communion table on Sunday. That was her gift and she used it.

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 you, "I created you to be you. I gave you gifts to be you. Why weren't you more like you?"

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 precious and valuable 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.

As we move into our Time and Talent Stewardship Campaign, I encourage you to consider how you have been blessed by God. 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 Worship and Wonder 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? Why deny the world the gift of you?

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. God doesn't want to punish us; God wants to celebrate us! But you'll never hear God say to you, "Well done," unless you do something.