

Message Delivered at Christ Church
November 12th & 13th, 2011
TEXT: Matthew 25:14-30
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

So here's a parable this morning...

A wealthy man goes on a journey. We don't know where he's going; we don't know why; we just know that he's leaving town...apparently for a while. And when we say that he's wealthy, we mean that he's really wealthy. This guy's got a lot of money.

But he's leaving town, and he's going to be gone for a while, and money doesn't do much if it just sits around, so he takes three of his slaves and places in their charge some of his capital. Not everybody, as we know, has the same aptitudes; and rarely is wealth acquired without some perceptiveness towards the abilities of others. So he may have three slaves unto whom he is willing to entrust his wealth, but he's not giving all of them the same amount. To one, he gives five talents; to a second, he gives two; to a third, he gives one.

Now a talent was the largest valuation of money in the ancient world. The most conservative estimate of the value of a talent is about \$300,000; but it could be as much as half a million. So one person is given \$1.5 million to work with; another is given \$600,000; and another is given \$300,000.

The master entrusted all this to his servants.

The first two slaves...the one with the five talents and the one with the two...take what they have been given, and find some way to multiply it. So they took what they were given; used it; and turned it into something twice as big. Clearly, one capable of doubling the value of one's investment is shrewd. Just as clearly, one who doubles the value of one's wealth doesn't flinch at working hard and taking a risk. The motivation behind their behavior is unknown. The only thing we can say is that somehow they understood that they were supposed to do something with what their master had given them; so they did.

The third slave...well, we don't know much at this point about his motive, either. We just hear what he did. He took the talent, and buried it in the ground. He's not going to double his talent that way. He won't even keep up with the rate of inflation that way. But at least it's safe; at least it won't get lost.

So after a long time, the master comes back; and he held a reckoning with this three slaves to settle the accounts. So he held a series of managerial meetings with his servants.

The first two slaves came up to him, and reported that they had doubled his money. The one with five had used the five to make another five; and the one with two had used the two to make another two...

...and the master was livid with these two presumptuous slaves. "How dare you take the talents I gave you and treat them so thoughtlessly! You could have lost the entire thing! You took an absolutely unacceptable risk. I'm a really nice guy, but I didn't give you these talents so that you could be so reckless with them. Don't ever put what I have given you into such danger again. Better yet, be cast into the outer darkness..."

Finally, the one who had been given one talent came forward. "Master," he said, "it is a great joy that you give so freely; and since you have been gone I have daily celebrated how kind you are and that you always hold me in your arms, no matter what I do. I know that always I am safe with you. I was afraid I might lose it—it's a lot of money. So I buried the talent you gave me, and I now present it back to you safe and sound."

"Well done, good and trustworthy slave," replied the master. "You knew that I am always meek and mild and gentle and kind, and desire nothing but your safety and that you hold close what I have given you. Excellent work! Now you, too, leave my presence." And after returning the talent to his master, he did exactly that.

On his way to the cross in Jerusalem Jesus told a parable about a master, three slaves, and eight talents. It's not an easy parable. Everything's pretty good in it until we get to what happens to the last slave. To be sent to the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth because one is afraid...well, it doesn't seem to be very "Good News-ish." It's pretty obvious that the master stands for Jesus, and that doesn't sound very much like the Jesus we know. I was talking with some folks about this parable this week, and they said about it what I've often at least thought about it...couldn't the master be a little bit more understanding? Couldn't he have found a way to make his point short of weeping, gnashing teeth, and outer darkness?

So it just got me to wondering...what would this parable look like if we turned it upside down; if we turned it all upside down, how well would that really work?

Were a weekend message to be delivered on my version of the parable, the themes of it might be something like this...be cautious and be afraid. Let fear determine what we do. Play it safe. Remember how God has always rewarded the saints who have taken no chances and who have always chosen what's comfortable.

It might say that if we are truly blessed, God will give us one talent and is most pleased when we don't use it; when, in fact, we allow it to shrink; and that instead of taking a shot with what we've been given, we take our talent and bury it in the backyard.

In Jesus' parable, those who give it a try with what they have been given are given two rewards. First, they are given more. To the master, all these talents he gave are "a few things." So he gives to the good and trustworthy slaves even more. It seems to be kind of like exercise, or music, or math, or anything else...the more you do it, the more you receive from it. What Jesus seems to say in his parable is that the more grace we share, the more grace we're given. And second, that using of the talents they're given results in nothing less than joyful fellowship with the one who gave them. "Enter into the joy of your master," says the master in Jesus' parable.

If an upside down parable is an opposite parable...well, maybe it makes sense that a reward for such great caution is to lose back to the master what had been given, and then be sent away to be by one's self. Makes sense, I guess. Rarely does anybody grow through a clutching life, and that includes growing in relationships.

I think those are some of the themes of a sermon based on the upside down parable.

Jesus' parable is tougher than the one I told. Without a doubt. A message on his parable, though, might focus on this: God has given each one of us talents, and rejoices when we use them. So be courageous; swing away. Give it our best shot. As we do so, there is the possibility that what we have been given will be multiplied, even doubled. But we aren't to get stuck on that.

Take a look in your bulletin, and notice how in Jesus' parable the master's gracious words to the first two slaves are exactly the same. The one who brings home five does not get a greater reward than the one who brings home two. They both receive the same words from the master. But here's what I think is even more important than that: the master's "well done, good and trustworthy slave" may have nothing to do with the fact that they doubled their talents, or brought home any bacon at all. The master may have offered these words simply because they did something.

A message on Jesus' parable would invite each of us to look up and imagine the possibilities. A message on Jesus' parable says "Be counted. You were given talents because you matter." The master went away that we might practice walking confident in what we've been given, and because someone needs us to use them.

A sermon on Jesus' parable might remind us that everybody gets afraid, and that it's what we do when we're afraid where we have the choice. It might point out that the parable doesn't say anything about the emotional state of the first two slaves. They may have been just as afraid as the third one was.

Everybody is afraid of something, or is afraid sometimes. We are wired to be afraid. It's a leftover from when our greatest enemies were lions, and tigers, and bears, and what comes out at night. So everybody makes a decision...usually several times a day, in my experience...whether it is fear that

will govern our behavior, or whether it is fear's opposite that will govern our behavior: and the opposite of fear is faith. So a message on Jesus' parable might say fret not the fear, for always God's Spirit is in our corner leading towards faith..."

A message on Jesus' parable might say: You want to know what using talents looks like? Look over in the education building right now; or the GCC tonight; or in this worship space; or consider the 350 people who helped make a home for our friends this weekend; or consider bringing education to children in Church Hill, Haiti, or South Sudan; or consider those in one of our Bible studies. Some of those who serve in those areas...well, we didn't think we could do it. And so we discovered talents we didn't even know we'd been given. Happens all the time. Here, and where we find ourselves this afternoon and tomorrow morning...which is, of course, our primary mission field.

A message on Jesus' parable might say something like this...Five. God has made Christ Church a five talent people. If ever we wonder how many talents we've been given, the answer is at least five...and maybe we always remember that. Look around and outside at what we've been given, and look again at the saints gathered in this space and then going into the world...

None of which doesn't mean that times aren't hard. It just means that still, if there is any group of people equipped by God to help bring transformation, healing, and restoration to where we are...it's this people.

Just as surely God calls his people to follow, even more surely does the Lord give the talents that we may do so. And even more surely than that does the Lord rejoice when we use them...not perfectly, but as best we can.

There are lots of ways to understand what Jesus says here. Not a single one, probably, will make us more comfortable. But there's an old saying...that Jesus came to both comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. This ain't necessarily the parable we read when we're afflicted, that's for sure. But if we're sometimes too comfortable...which at least I am, certainly way too often...there may be no better parable for us to spend time with. And it's certainly a parable more hopeful and energizing than the crazy one I told.

How many talents we each have doesn't make a difference. We all got 'em to use them...you; and me; and us together. We can spend our energy worrying about what Jesus says about the guy who buries his. But who knows when the master's coming back, and I'm not sure that's the best use of our time.

Maybe instead, we just simply keep using the ones we've been given, watch them grow, and enjoy the presence of the master...and remember always that the Lord's words "Well done, good and faithful servant" may have absolutely nothing to do with the results they achieved, and everything to do with the fact that they simply used them.