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Pentecost 24A

Parable of the Talents

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Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus once told a story of a wealthy landowner who was preparing for a long journey. He called his three servants and divided some money between them, each according to their ability. To one servant he gave five talents, meaning a large sum of money, to a second two, & to a third one.

Why is life like that? I don't know. We are all equal in the eyes of God. We are all guaranteed equal rights under the Constitution. In an election our votes are all equal. But when it comes to our abilities, we are as different as can be. God simply did not make us all the same. There are some people who can handle five talents; there are some who can handle only one. There are some persons who have great intellectual capabilities, and some who do not. There are some who have the ability to project and articulate their thoughts, and there are some who cannot. There are some who have physical prowess & attractive looks, and there are some who do not.

The important thing to remember is that each servant was given something. No one was left idle. You may not be a five-talent person, but you have talent. We all do. And you know something. I think that there are a whole lot more one and two talent people in this world than there are five talent people. But most of us are just 1 or 2 talent servants.

The landowner now went on his journey. When he returned he called together his three servants and asked them to give an account. It seems that the five talent man had invested his talent and was able to return an additional five talents, a 100% return. So, too, the two talent man doubles his money. "Well done, good and faithful servant." But what about the one talent man? He stepped forward and said: Sir, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow. So he returned that which he had originally been given him. The landowner, incensed, uses words such as "slothful" and "wicked." Angrily he took the talent back and gave it to the servant who now had ten.

It is interesting to note that in the 25th chapter of Matthew's Gospel there are three parables told in a row: The Parable of the Bridesmaid, The Parable of the Sheep and Goats, and the Parable of the Talents. Essentially the same phrase is used in each: after a long time. The bridegroom comes after a long time. The landowner returns after a long time. The judgment comes after a long time. Perhaps this is Matthew's way of saying to us: Our master may be delayed in his return, but, in the meanwhile, what are you doing with the talent that has been entrusted to you. Let us be clear on one issue. God asks us for a return. We had better not simply bury that which has been given us and return it when he comes.

Well, it is obvious that the villain of the story is the one talent man. The salient question is: why did he choose to do nothing with the one talent that had been given to him? We are not really given the answer. We are left to speculate. And that is precisely what I would like to do this morning. Speculate about his inaction.

First, he perhaps did nothing with his one talent because he feared failure. How did he word it: "I was afraid" and I hid my talent. Fearful of doing the wrong thing, he chose to do nothing at all. This was perhaps a man who did well under supervision, but now he is left on his own—he is terrified. We view this man with contempt because he hid his talent in the ground. But our contempt is misguided. This was considered the traditional way of saving money in that day in time. He was being a good conservative businessman. He was not going to risk someone else's money by buying into some speculative venture.

It seems like the older we get, the more conservative we get. Someone once said, if you are not liberal when you are young you do not have a heart. If you are not conservative when you are old you do not have a head. Perhaps this was an older gentleman. The tendency is to want to play it safe and not go out on a limb. He wanted to play it safe and what is wrong with that. Simply this, you cannot love if you are not willing to risk. What is the risk of love? That it will not be reciprocated. That people will not return our love. But as the people of God, we are called upon to be the people of daring. If Jesus had played it safe, we would not be sitting here this morning.

I want to be faithful to this text. I would say to you: Go, and take risks. Take risks, don't fear failure. As Wayne Gretzky, our favorite adopted Canadian hockey player once said, "You'll always miss 100% of the shots that you don't take."

Perhaps a second reason why this one talent man did nothing with his talent is that he played the game "if only." If only I had been given the talent of these other two men, then I could have accomplished something.

We like to play that game too. I would love to teach a Sunday school class, if only I had her ability. If only I had his voice I would sing in the choir. I would support the church if only I had a little more money. We would fully support the mission and ministry of the church if only we had a little more money in the budget. It is a dangerous game because it too easily gets us off the hook.

I love the story of the thirty-eight-year-old scrubwoman who would go to the movies and sigh, "If only I had her looks." She would listen to a singer and moan, "If only I had her voice." Then one day someone gave her a copy of the book, "The Magic of Believing." She stopped comparing herself with actresses and singers. She stopped crying about

what she didn't have and started concentrating on what she did have. She took inventory of herself and remembered that in high school she had a reputation for being the funniest girl around. She began to turn her liabilities into assets. When she was at the top of her career Phyllis Diller made over \$1 million a year. In the 1960's that was a great deal of money. She wasn't good-looking and she had a scratchy voice, but she could make people laugh.

Well, maybe God is saying something like that to us. Maybe when we complain that we wish that we had more, if only we were like someone other than ourselves, if only... He says to us: Use the gifts I have given you. Stop worrying about what you do not have and start concentrating on what you do have.

We could measurably strengthen this church if we were able to reactivate some of our inactive members, start using some of our unused gifts, start giving some of our one talent sums of money. Simply stirred up what we already have.

To me, however, neither of these reasons really gets to the heart of the issue. I really think that the one talent man did nothing with his talent because he thought to himself: Well, my one little talent won't make any difference anyway. There are a lot of people who feel that way today. I wonder if you took a poll of why people don't vote, that would be the answer given most: Well, my one little vote won't make any difference.

Sir Michael Costa, the celebrated conductor of the 19th century, was holding a rehearsal. As the mighty chorus rang out, accompanied by scores of instruments, the piccolo player--a little pint-sized flute--thinking perhaps that his contribution would not be missed amid so much music, stopped playing. Suddenly, the great leader stopped and cried out, "Where is the piccolo?"

The sound of that one small instrument was necessary to the harmony, and the Master Conductor missed it when it dropped out. The point? To the Conductor there are no insignificant instruments in an orchestra. Sometimes the smallest and seemingly least important one can make the greatest contribution and even if it doesn't seem to make that big a difference to the audience at large, THE CONDUCTOR KNOWS IT right away!

In the Church the players and the instruments are diverse--different sizes, different shapes, different notes, different roles to play. But like the piccolo player in Sir Michael's orchestra, we often in our own minds decide that our contribution is not significant. Our contribution couldn't possibly make a difference. And so we quit playing. Stop doing that which we've been given to do. We drop out. But the Conductor immediately notices. From our perspective, our contribution may be small, but from God's, it is crucial.

I just have to believe I'm talking to some people this morning, who for whatever reasons: pain, exhaustion, insecurity, criticism, misbehavior are convinced that your contribution doesn't mean a hill of beans in the bigger scheme of things. We have buried our talent in the ground. Jesus has something to say. Use the gifts that God has given you.

I don't know when I spend hours on a sermon every way that it is going to make any difference at all in the life of anybody. But I do know that it is better to try than not to try. I don't know that if a teacher makes an effort to reach out to a troubled student that it is going to make any difference in the long run, but I do know that it is better to try than not to try. When a person teaches a church school class or goes to the trouble of singing in the choir and having to show up for rehearsal, they have no guarantee whatsoever that their efforts will help make God more real to an individual. But I do know that it is better to try than not to try.

We are so used to looking at gigantic issues, such as Covid, racism, poverty and world hunger. We are stupefied by the enormity of such issues and say: "What's the use? Anything that I could do would be so little that it would have the effect of an eyedropper compared to the ocean. Therefore, since I cannot resolve the whole issue, I will do nothing at all."

May I remind you that when the Good Samaritan stopped to help a beaten victim on the Jericho Road that day he did not resolve all of the social, political, and economic ills of first century Israel. But he did what he could. And that is the issue for us. Are you doing what you can, where you are, with what you have? Amen