

Mt 25:14-30
13 November 2011

“Talented”

There’s a verse in today’s gospel reading that reminds me of a sermon I preached several years ago. My subject was Luke 13; I was talking about the parable of the barren fig tree. There’s a man who has planted a fig tree in his vineyard. He complains to the gardener that after three years, the tree still hasn’t produced any fruit. He wants it cut down, but the gardener suggests that he fertilize the tree and give it one more year.

The question the landowner asks the gardener is one that caught my attention. “Why should it be wasting the soil?” (v. 7). In the Revised English Bible, the question is still **more** abrupt. “Why should it go on taking goodness from the soil?” The Greek word that’s used (καταργέω, *katargeō*) can even be taken to mean, “Why, in addition to doing no good, does it **sterilize** the ground?”¹ That fig tree is downright hostile!

By the way, my sermon title was, “Why Do I Take Up Space?” (Don’t worry, the sermon wasn’t as gloomy as the title might suggest!)

The verse from **today’s** reading that got me thinking about all that is verse 29, which says “to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” It sounds like a rather harsh warning to get going, or...it’s the end of you!

Today’s reading in Matthew is the parable of the talents. It just so happens that, in our study of the parables of Jesus, we were discussing it this week. It’s a very interesting and very disturbing little story. But before we launch into it, let’s take a quick look at what parables are. (This will be a bit of review for those who’ve come to the studies.)

The word “parable” comes from the Greek παραβολή (*parabolē*), which means, a “juxtaposition” or a “comparison.” “Comparison” is a good word to use, because Jesus often says that the kingdom of heaven “is like” something—or it may be “compared” to something. That’s how he introduces many of his parables.

Jesus uses examples from everyday life in his teachings. In his stories, he employs images that everyone understands, regardless of their station in life. It’s an effective method of teaching. Although, what’s going on in **this** story would be enough to get **anyone’s** attention!

We’re presented with a really rich guy who’s about to go on a trip. He calls together three of his servants and lays on them some cold, hard cash. The first one gets five talents, the second one gets two, and the third servant gets one. The scripture adds: “to each according to his ability” (v. 15). While he’s gone, he expects them to **prove** their ability by making him money.

Upon his return, he hears from the first two servants that they have doubled the amount entrusted to them. This report of easy money thrills him to no end. “Enter into the joy of your master,” he says (vv. 21, 23).

However, when the third servant tells him that he dug a hole in the ground and hid his talent there, the guy is furious. That’s what leads to the outburst I mentioned a

¹ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, 5th ed. (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1922), 340.

moment ago. He calls the servant “worthless,” and orders that he be thrown “into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 30).

I imagine that, over the years, this parable has given plenty of people an uneasy feeling—even a queasy feeling. A lot of that hinges on the way we answer two questions. Actually, I’m sure there are more, but I’ll focus on two questions that would seem to determine how we feel about, and understand, this parable.

Here’s the first question. What is a talent?

If you were paying attention during the scripture reading—or up to this point during the sermon—it will be obvious that, in the parable, a talent is very different from the way we think of it today. We think of a talent as a skill, an ability, an area of expertise.

That’s not true for the people in Jesus’ time. For them, a talent is an amount of money; it is a **huge** amount of money. A talent roughly equals ten thousand denarii. One denarius was the usual wage for a day’s labor. So if you do the math, allowing for Sabbaths, one talent roughly equals thirty-two years of labor.

Of course, you’re not **supposed** to do the math. These vast sums of money are intended to be a massive exaggeration. It’s a storytelling device that the original audience would understand. They would understand that no master turns over to his servants what amounts to be a king’s ransom.

I said that there are two questions that help shape the way we approach today’s text. The first question was, “What is a talent?” The second question is very short, but it needs help in getting set up.

Our reading starts with verse 14: “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.” The Good News Bible begins, “At that time the Kingdom of heaven will be like this.” That phrase, “the kingdom of heaven,” doesn’t appear in the Greek. Inserting that phrase is an editorial decision; it’s an interpretation. Translating from one language to another necessarily **requires** those kinds of decisions. We just need to be aware that it influences the way we understand the stuff we read.

So, here’s the second (very short) question that needed help in getting set up. Going back to how the parable starts, “For it is as if a man, going on a journey,” et cetera, et cetera...I ask, “What is it?” That’s all; nothing more. Just, what is “it”? For **it** is as if a man, and so on...

Is Jesus talking about the kingdom of heaven? That’s one possibility. Of course, we also have the uncomfortable prospect of comparing God to a figure of immense wealth, whose affluence is equaled by his anger.

The original audience was **also** aware that charging interest, which this figure seems to expect, was against the law of Moses (Ex 22:25, Lv 25:35-38). Moneylenders were considered to be disreputable people. Or at least, they weren’t thought of as having the **noblest** of qualities.

Francis Beare describes the fellow as “a capitalist, with great wealth at his disposal.” He is “a rapacious man, making profits out of ventures in which he takes no risks and others do the work.”²

Not all of Jesus’ parables are about the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes he talks about other stuff. So what else could “it” be?

² Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1981), 486.

The parable right before this one, the one about the ten bridesmaids, is about **waiting** for the kingdom of heaven. It's about living life with awareness. Verse 13 says, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." Could "it" be about the **delay** of the coming of the kingdom, rather than the kingdom itself?

In the parable of the ten bridesmaids, we have the verse, "As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept" (v. 5). In today's parable, Matthew makes sure he tells us, "After a **long time** the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them" (v. 19).

All I'm saying is that it's possible to see this story in a way **other than** God being presented as Donald Trump with a vengeance, shouting, "You're fired!"

It's possible to see the message in these terms: "We shouldn't **be like** the master in the parable because the world in which people **like that** come out on top is passing away." As Episcopalian writer Sarah Dylan Breuer tells us, "Jesus will bring his work in the world to completion."³

But sometimes it's hard to believe that. Sometimes it's hard to **live** that. In today's call to worship, we reminded each other that we are "all children of light and children of the day." We reminded each other that we need to "keep awake and be sober." We made a promise to "encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed we are doing."

Sometimes it seems like the appearance of the Lord is delayed. It's easy to lose heart. Sometimes those promises seem to have evaporated—promises of healing, promises of freedom from whatever binds us, promises of life abundant, much more abundant than what that guy with the talents is doling out.

It's **especially** then that, following our friend Sarah Breuer, we must ask "if we really can trust in that enough to risk living as Jesus taught us rather than according to the demands of those who try to set themselves up in Jesus' place as our lord, who try to enslave us to worldly standards by telling us that our security is in acquiring resources for ourselves and striking out at our enemies."

That's not how Jesus teaches us to live. He doesn't teach us to live lives of shame. I'm not talking about coming clean when we've done somebody wrong; that's a totally different thing. What I mean is, too often, we shame others. Too often, we accept shame. Too often, we take the master and the third servant as our model for living. We may think, or even say, "You worthless piece of (*fill in the blank*)!" We may direct that at others or at ourselves.

Friends, there is no room for shame in the joy of our Lord!

Having said all that, I don't want to give the impression that our role is merely a passive one. Even though "talent" means money in the parable, we can't ignore what it means for us. It's been noted that we can find an "analogy with the spiritual realm—spiritual gifts atrophy if they are not used, and increase as they are exercised actively."⁴

To be "talented" in that way doesn't bring harm to the other. Sportscasters speak of the truly gifted, truly talented, players as making all of the players around them better. That puts a different light on burying our talent, so to speak. It would be in **that** sense that we harm others and ourselves.

³ www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/11/proper_28_year_.html

⁴ Beare, 491.

In a few moments, we'll sing the hymn, "God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens." I want close with the first verse.

"God, who stretched the spangled heavens / Infinite in time and place, / Flung the suns in burning radiance / Through the silent fields of space: / We, Your children in Your likeness, / Share inventive powers with you; / Great Creator, still creating, / Show us what we yet may do."