

November 15, 2020     Matthew 25:14-20, *The Message Bible*

“It’s also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master’s investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master’s money.

“After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’

“The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master’s investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’

“The servant given one thousand said, ‘Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.’

“The master was furious. ‘That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest.

“Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this “play-it-safe” who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.’

Today’s Gospel reading is a reminder to me of the power of stories, especially those from holy scripture, to offer new understandings, no matter how familiar. I have heard this story, The Parable of the Talents, many, many times. I know the parable well. Traditionally this story comes to us at the end of a liturgical year. That is because it is strongly related to end times.

Today’s reading is often used as part of a stewardship campaign. That is when a church reaches out to its members, asking them to share their talents, often in the form of money, but also time and abilities.

This tradition of interpreting The Parable of the Talents in this way is easy to understand. The Greek word that Peterson translated as “a thousand dollars” is “talanta”, which has traditionally been translated into the English as “talent”. “Talanta” in Greek is a monetary unit representing a very large sum of money. Over time, influenced by this Bible story, the English language transliterated “talanta” into “talent”, meaning having a particular ability or skill. It was an easy transition from that point to the church talking about increasing one’s talents – money and skills – by investing them in the church.

This is a very acceptable interpretation of one of the messages of God’s reign to be found in this parable. It was, to be honest, the only one that I really have used. As I dug deeper into the parable this time, I was excited by the interpretations I have missed all these years. I share a little of what I am learning with you, because I find they are especially important for us in these days.

Jesus, in telling this story, is using an enormous sum. A talent in Jesus’ day had the value of roughly 15 years of a worker’s wage. At that time a staggering amount. Imagine one was

given 5 times that, another 3 times. We are so immersed in a capitalist system that our focus is automatically drawn to the gifts the Master entrusts to the servants, who, in turn, double their worth. It is the growth that enamors us and we overlook the enormous trust the Master has in his servants.

This trust is only deepened as the story unfolds. The Master leaves after entrusting his servants with these enormous funds. There is no “trust, but verify”. The Master steps away just far enough to allow each servant the freedom to make their own decision about how to care for the talents, the moneys entrusted to them.

Two of the three servants lived into that trust, using the entrusted moneys as they felt would be fitting to their Master. Their faith in doing so was rewarded with growth. Their willingness to use the money was rewarded when the Master returned by their being made partners. The one servant who did not trust in the Master’s estimation of him, whose lack of faith in himself kept him from using the money entrusted to him, had nothing to show the Master upon his return.

Seen from this angle Jesus is telling us God’s love for us is so great that not only have we been entrusted with great riches, but God also give us the freedom to choose how to manage the gift given. From what the third servant says we know the servants know the Master and know what the Master’s expectations are. Two servants, following what they knew of the Master, stepped out in faith and were rewarded with growth. They become full partners with the Master. The one who knew what was expected, but chose to bury his head in the sand and refused to use what was entrusted to him, found only utter darkness.

In Jesus, in the prophets, in the stories of Israel, we know what God expects of us. We know, too, that we have been

given responsibility to care for all creation; called to be God’s partners in the care and growth of creation. Perhaps our misuse of land, air, and water, as well as people, with the resulting consequences are how we are being thrown into utter darkness.

There is still more to learn from this parable. The third servant, the one who received the one talent, knew the Master’s reputation; a reputation today that some might describe as capricious and unfathomable, a master to be feared. The Master’s generosity and trust were not this servant’s motivation. It was fear. The fear paralyzed him. It took all faith away. The fear caused him to bury that which was entrusted to him. Fear severed him from the light of life. Growth was not possible.

In these days this part of the parable we get, viscerally. Fear is very front and center in our lives. The pandemic. The political and racial divide. The financial uncertainty. And, the physical distancing, which is perhaps the stealth dis-ease that is causing us the most problems. All these causes fear and makes us want to bury our talents and our responsibilities; just happy, if we don’t lose ground.

Fear keeps us from acting. This fear is as small as thinking “I don’t have anything to contribute.” “I am insignificant. No one will listen to me.” “I don’t have enough time.” “If I share my wealth with the church, I won’t have enough for myself.”

The truth is we are all gifted; God has entrusted “talents” with each one of us. Most important of all: What we do does make a difference. We are to act and turn the rest over to God. We are, after all, called to be partners. God, our Partner, will not let us down.

All of Jesus’ parables are, in a sense, a challenge. The challenge in this parable is to acknowledge that God is our

Master and has entrusted us with great riches – life itself. Such an acknowledgement leads us to use the life we have been given in such a manner that it grows. Implicit in this parable is life-growth is depended on following the Master, a way of living revealed to us in Jesus. This is no easy path, which accounts for the fear of the third servant. Nonetheless, following Jesus is the challenge and is the path to an expanding life, to fullness of life.

What is missing from the parable is how, exactly, the first two servants doubled their talents. I would put to you the answer to that is sharing in community as generously and faithfully as the Master shared with the servants. When we invest in our faith community – an investment of time, ability, and wealth, then we find not only our voice, but together our voices are amplified. It is in community that we grow our individual gifts, as we grow into a body and family of faith.

Together, in faith, sharing the gifts God has entrusted to us allows us to multiply these talents; to double, at least, these talents. And, in doing so, we become God's partners, vessels of God's creative and healing love, sharers of light and life.

Know, then, that each one of us is more than a child of God, we are called to be God's partners in the work of caring for all creation.

I am honored to be part of a church that has chosen to accept the challenge and work hard at growing the gifts of life God has entrusted to us. Amen.