

Living Generously

Matthew 25:14-30

November 13, 2011

The parable of the talents claims our attention. At one level it is about money and at another level it is about something more than money. I am going to look at what Jesus says in two ways: literal and metaphorical.

Start with the literal reading of the story: After all, talanta was a coin that was the largest denomination of currency in the Roman empire. We should translate talanta as "a huge bucket full of solid gold" or "winning the Ohio Lottery." One coin was worth 2 million dollars. Jesus passing out money to his disciples: 10 million, 5 million, and 2 million. The five talent and two talent investors double their money. Considering what's happening today, who wouldn't take 100% return?

Churches across the country are cashing in on the literal reading. The Bay Area Fellowship, in Corpus Christi, recently gave away flat-screen televisions, skateboards, Fender guitars, furniture and 15 cars and 15,000 gift bags, each with about \$300 worth of free goods and services to increase attendance. At Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip, if a lucky -- or "blessed and highly favored" -- churchgoer is in the right seat, they win a cash prize. At each of the three Sunday services, the Rev. Dan Willis pulls a number of one seat from a bag and the worshiper in that seat wins a cash prize. Two of the churchgoers win \$250 and the third gets \$500.

Read literally, Jesus condemns a man for not investing his money wisely. The guy who buries his money in the ground – the tin-can investment broker – gets a real chewing out. Makes you wonder what Jesus would say if he occupied Wall Street, doesn't it? We get the idea that the best thing to do with lots of money is to make more. Read literally, we get the idea that money won't help us if we bury it in the ground. Go out and make more money, and the more you make the more you'll be able to give away. I am not opposed to this reading. After all, it is Stewardship Campaign time.

When a parable of Jesus seems to pat us on the back and say, "Good job," we should be suspicious of our reading. In the culture, and now in church, we're investing – and yet we know there is something corrupt in our money system. And I mistrust the easy cop out that so many Americans are taking: Blame the bankers. It's like trying to blame the Jews for killing Jesus or blaming the Depression on Hoover. The blame game allows us to squirm off the hook as surely as if we were a slick-backed, ten-pound catfish in a Louisiana bayou.

A New York banker says that the real problem is money in politics. A Chicago banking CEO says that “many American business leaders got confused and their moral compasses stopped working.” America has an ethics recession, integrity loss, a drive for excellence without a soul, immoral competition, and too much willingness to win at any cost – from boardrooms to football stadiums.

A cartoon shows five people standing against a wall – each with a message board. A Wall Street representative stands off to the side reading the signs: 9% unemployed + 90% worried sick about losing work = 99%.

Well, if this story is literally about money, judgment day, just as Matthew says, has come now. Matthew bundles three judgment stories here in chapter 25 and in all three stories, we get Jesus and judgment. Judgment stories are not about the end of the world, or predicting the rapture, but judgment is here and now. Judgment is Jesus; Jesus is judgment.

Look at that one talent guy. Despicable isn't he? Sad? He is the culprit in the parable – he did nothing. Somewhere we must stop being scared, stop burying our gifts, imagination, ingenuity, and intelligence. In a world of institutions too-big-to-fail, we have to focus on those considered too-small-to-matter.

If this story is really about money, we are in big trouble – weeping and gnashing of teeth trouble. We can't live well and lived scared.

Now, let's read the story a second way – as an extended metaphor. The talents given out are not money. What Jesus gives his disciples before he leaves is a boat load of gifts; not a wad of cash. You don't really think that Jesus, preparing to leave his disciples, says, “Here guys, I giving you a few million bucks to tide you over until I return.” Jesus is not a stockbroker but the savior of the universe. These are particular gifts to sustain the church between the first and second coming of Jesus.

These are, as the priest says at the distribution of the elements of bread and wine, “The gifts of God for the people of God.” The sacraments of communion and baptism, the preaching of the gospel, the practices of reconciliation and forgiveness are all God's gifts for God's people. And if we receive these as gifts, Sunday after Sunday, and if we respond to them as we respond to other

gifts we receive at Christmas and on our birthday, we will experience them not as boring rituals but joyful moments.

The one talent man blames God for his lack of vision, his fear, and his indifference. His sins are blasphemy and sloth, the yang to the yin of greed. He makes up a false story about the nature of God. "I knew you were a hard man." The one talent man had just enough religion to tell a pack of lies about God. He mistrusts God (like every other Adam and Eve), and sees God as critical and hostile, always to be outmaneuvered when possible.

The one talent man manages to mumble one truth: "I was afraid." Listen, the fear factor has been multiplied by a hundred in America. Scare tactics dominate American politics. We are riddled with fear. We are afraid when it comes to money. We are afraid when it comes to faith, and the country is now filled with people who have made fear a growth industry: "Be afraid; be very afraid." America has a boom in fear and doom.

What really concerns me is how often we are scared faithless. What one thing have you done this year on the basis of faith – one way you have gone forward not knowing the outcome, one way you have moved forward without seeing or knowing for sure but trusting God? Does fear or faith dominate the church? Does fear or faith drive our decisions? In the parable, the faithful are congratulated: Well done faithful servants. The fearful get the Matthew special: outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth. The faithful receive joy; the fearful get despair.

Our fearful age could use some fearless Scriptures[i]: Let the people of God say, I will not fear though tens of thousands assail me on every side.

Let the people of God say, Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Let the people of the Lord say, The LORD is the stronghold of my life— of whom shall I be afraid? Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea.

To all our pent-up fears, all our downtrodden hopes, all our broken dreams, Jesus says, "I have given you all the gifts you need. Why are you afraid? In

my name you can transform lives, rescue people from loneliness, failure, and fear.” The story, you see, is really about Jesus and all the gifts he has provided for us.

This is who Jesus is and he has generously given us what we need to live in joy instead of fear. He has taught us, shown us, and empowered us. Choose faith over fear. Fear is based on greed; faith is based on generosity. Whether money or faith, whether life or death, whether war or pestilence, whether good times or bad, we do not have to be afraid. “The gifts of God for the people of God!” I have no idea what you plan to do about your stewardship pledge, but I do know that what we give has everything to do with our deliverance from greed. Live generously, m

[i]Do not be afraid of the Egyptians or the sea. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take possession of the land. Do not be fainthearted or afraid; do not panic or be terrified by them. Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.” “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished. He said: “Listen, King Jehoshaphat and all who live in Judah and Jerusalem! This is what the LORD says to you: ‘Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. For the battle is not yours, but God’s. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Go out to face them tomorrow, and the LORD will be with you.’” When I am afraid, I put my trust in you. The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me? Say to him, ‘Be careful, keep calm and don’t be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smoldering stubs of firewood—because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,’ declares the LORD. “Do not be afraid; you will not be put to shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him, declares the LORD, for I am with you and will save you and deliver you from his hands. Do not lose heart or be afraid when rumors are heard in the land; one rumor comes this year, another the next, rumors of violence in the land and of ruler against ruler. “Joseph son of David, do not

be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. And so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for men." "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.