

“Courage and Talent”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

Let me begin by saying that in today’s lectionary gospel, Jesus does not offer us a tidy parable. Sometimes in parables, we can draw easy parallels between Jesus’ imagined characters, and their theological equivalents.

Here we have a master who entrusts his servants with his talents. Now, you have to understand that a talent in this context does not mean an innate or even hard-earned gift to play string instruments as well as Mineko or Rachel or John, or to be able to act like Cynthia, or create beautiful textiles like Jane, or to understand engineering concepts like Joe, or design art like Lilah, although these folks are indeed very talented. A talent also did not simply mean money, like we hear of a denarius at the time meant the wages for one day of work.

A talent, instead, was a HUGE amount of money: worth 60,000 days of work for the average laborer. That’s 20 years of work. Plus, a talent was made of gold and it weighed about the size of a person of that time. So, literally, one talent was worth your weight in gold. There’s no telling what the landowner did to have that amount of money— let alone the five talents he gave to the first servant, and the two talents he gave to the second servant, to oversee. And, there’s no telling what these servants did to increase the talents— those who chose to, at least. The story tells us that the third servant, who was given just one talent, buried it in the ground. The servants who multiplied their talents were greatly rewarded. But the one who buried the talent was utterly scorned, and sent to the darkness where there was great weeping and gnashing of teeth. *Yikes!*

At face value, if we put God in place of the landlord, this parable seems to stand with a prosperity gospel and the assumption that those who grow their wealth are virtuous and righteous, while those who don’t are lazy and even evil. It’s what happens often in our capitalistic society: the rich get rewarded, and the poor get blamed.

I remember in 1998 when I was on a study trip to Israel, and to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. On our days in the West Bank, we visited Bethlehem— where Jesus was born. We also visited a settlement, outside of Hebron. The woman we interviewed there had been a California woman who had made a pilgrimage to Israel with her husband, to help populate the land. And indeed she had accomplished her goal, as mother to nine children, and counting! But her family’s mansion sat on a settlement outside of Hebron- land that legally belongs to Palestinians. She showed us around with pride, pointing out the gleaming homes, and commenting on how well they had cultivated the land, a dry land with little water. And indeed, it is true. There were fruit trees blooming, beautiful gardens. In fact, she used their success in creating an oasis out of desert as justification for being there— as if the Palestinians who had lived there before and were driven out, who had gotten by on a mostly subsistence lifestyle in harmony with the

environment, did not have a right to be there because they hadn't made wealth out of dominating desert sand and rock. "What had they done with this precious land?" She asked. What had they done with the talent?

But something that may feel closer to home, is what I experienced in my own church. Perhaps it was this parable that contributed to my feeling, growing up in a large and affluent church, that if you were wealthy, it was a sign that you were right with God, and if you were poor— well, that was something to be ashamed of. It's why I completely stopped going to church for a couple of years after my mom hit a rough patch financially. I looked at the luxurious cars in the parking lot, saw the designer clothes of my teenage peers, and I felt like church was a place where I didn't belong if I couldn't measure up to the successes of my fellow congregants. Boy, did I have it wrong! Or, maybe the church did, if a kid could grow up there, faithfully attending worship and Sunday School, and come to think such things.

We will see pretty clearly in next Sunday's scripture that Jesus sides with the poor and downtrodden, and that solidarity and care also shows up in the sermon on the mount. So, even on this Pledge Dedication Sunday, when we specifically ask you to make a promise to financially support the ministries of this church, I want to say that this parable is not simply a lesson to invest God's money well and you will be rewarded. It is more than that. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament Scholar, said in her book on the parables, "Religion has been defined as designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. We do well to think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. Therefore, if we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that' or, worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough."

When I looked at what I preached three years ago when this passage last came up, I saw that I leaned into the third servant as the courageous and faithful one. He saw that the landowner was not a moral and upright man: as the third servant says to defend his choice to bury the talent: I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." In other words, the landowner was rich because he exploited others' funds. So, in my last sermon on this topic, I decided that the servant who buried the talent was the hero, because at least as far as he was able, he put an end to making wealth through dishonest means.

But parables don't have to mean just one thing. Like a well aged wine, they can have different flavors the longer you swirl them around in your mouth— or for those who don't drink wine, like orange juice can taste different if you drink it plain, and then try it again after eating something sweet. I suppose Jesus intended that complexity, for some of them at least.

If we don't assume that each of the characters have to equate to someone in a heavenly realm, we can just accept this comparison of the kingdom of heaven to an experience much more ordinary, on earth. Jews were not even supposed to draw interest, so Jesus' characters who profit through investing are not neatly representing any religious group from Jesus' community, and the landowner wouldn't neatly represent God.

I want to share an interpretation of this passage I had never considered before, by Anna Carter Florence. I'm going to read it as she wrote it in an article on this passage:

A man— let's call him Jesus— was going on a journey. He called his slaves— let's call them disciples— to him, and entrusted the gospel to them. To one, he gave stories; to another, he gave compassion; to the third, he gave the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There were other disciples who got other things, but we'll concentrate on these three. Then Jesus went away.

The disciple who got the stories went out and told them, and soon there were five other disciples telling those stories. The disciple who received compassion went out and offered to someone else, and that person became a disciple, too, and she went on to give that compassion to others as well. But the disciple who had been given the bread of life and the cup of salvation dug a hole in the ground and buried them.

After a long time Jesus came back, and he asked his disciples to come and tell him what they had done with what he had given to them. The first two disciples told him about the stories and the compassion, and they introduced the new disciples, and those disciples introduced still other disciples that *they* had made. Jesus was very pleased. "Well done, good and trustworthy disciples," he said to them. "You have been trustworthy in a few things, and now I will trust you with many things. Enter into my joy!"

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Then it was the third disciple's turn. The third disciple told Jesus, Master, I knew you were a harsh man. I knew you reaped where you didn't sow and gathered where you didn't scatter seed. I was afraid— of messing up, of not getting the theology right, of what you'd do to me if I did— so I went and hid the bread of life and the cup of salvation in the ground. Here, you can have it back."

But Jesus replied, "You wicked and lazy disciple! You knew, didn't you, that 'I reap where I do not sow and gather where I do not scatter?' Well, if you were sure of *that* (where did you *get* that?) you at least should have taken the bread of life and the cup of salvation to the church, and let them figure out what to do with it! Then when I came back, at least we would have some broken bread and those baskets full of leftovers!"

Jesus continued, "Take the bread and the cup away from this disciple and give it to one of the others. For all those who have the good news, even more will be given to them. But from those who have nothing— because they have *buried* my gospel in the *ground*— even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless disciple, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Then, bring him back to the church next Sunday and we'll start again.

-(*Preaching the Lesson, Lectionary Homiletics, Volume XIX, Number 6, p. 61*)

Burying your talent in the ground is what we do when there is a scarcity mentality:

It won't be here tomorrow.

What I have to offer is not good enough.

I have to be wealthy, or impressive in some other way, in order to have something useful to give Jesus' ministry.

My gift won't make a difference.

But Jesus in Matthew consistently points us away from a scarcity understanding of God's gifts. Instead, we find the paradox: when you give of yourself courageously, God's response is courageous, too. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive others. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. If someone takes your coat, offer your cloak as well.

The third servant assumed that blessing and talent are scarce. And so, in fear, he decided to hide it well, to preserve it. But God's economy seems to require some level of risk. It requires opening yourself to the love and vulnerability that Jesus demands.

If this kind of risk does not come naturally to you, don't feel bad. A church is a good place to practice it. *Our* church is a good place to practice it. Whether it is the courage of learning to pray in public for the first time in life, or answering a late night call to go grocery shopping for a hungry mother of 5 from our larger community— as several people did last week— or *being* that hungry mother, trusting a church that is not her own to help her with what she needed in that moment to mother her family... Acts such as these may not seem that big a deal, but they can lead the faithful to envisioning a world where our neighbors wouldn't have to go hungry to begin with, and then working, in guidance with the Spirit and our pooled creativity and passion and community partners, to make it so. This is what growing a talent can mean. This is something the church is called to do.