

The Rev. Josh Stephens
St. John in the Wilderness
Pentecost 25; Year A
Nov. 19, 2023

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, “It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

The Church’s Got Talent

Our parable ends with a sting this morning. The one slave was given a single talent and he was afraid about what to do with it, so he hid it away. The ending lands harshly on modern ears:

But his master replied, “You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have at least invested

my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; for from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Eeek! This ending lands on us roughly. Sometimes rather than “Thanks be to God,” I find myself saying, “Thanks a lot God!” It sounds harsh at first reading with this “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

It sounds harsh but then I started doing some math. And let me just say that you have to love Bible stories that require math in order to understand them. I know you all got up this morning hoping to do some math when you came to church.

So, our story says these servants have been entrusted with *talents*. It says that the first one was given five *talents*, the second was given two *talents*, and the third was given one *talent*. The master was going away on a long journey and he entrusted his *talents* to these three people, wanting them to do something with them.

But in order to understand this story, we need to know exactly what a “talent” is. We need to know how much it’s worth. A talent was a unit of measuring money in the Roman Empire. It was a certain quantity. Talents were a very important and very large sum of money. Now, I can tell that you have a question. You’re just dying to know, aren’t you, “How much was a talent worth?” Good question! A talent was equal to *6000 denarii*. And *one denarius* was worth a day’s labor. It was equal to how much you get paid for a day’s worth of work.

First let’s figure out how much a day’s work is worth. (By the way, I’m not sure how much minimum wage is in the Kingdom of God but I’m pretty sure it’s not \$7.25/hr.) When I was doing a lot of labor as a kid, I always charged at least \$10/hr, but that was 20 years ago. So, let’s just say that for our math the hourly rate is \$15/hr. Now we have all the information we need to determine how much a talent was worth. Are you ready? Are you ready for some church math?

- Preliminary math: what is $\$15/\text{hr} \times 8 \text{ hrs}/\text{day}$? It’s \$120 ...so that is one denarius.
 - A talent is equal to 6000 denarii so what’s $\$120 \times 6000$? It’s \$720,000.
 - One talent is therefore \$720,000.

- 1. So, the first guy is entrusted with 5 talents!
 - What is $5 \times \$720,000$? It’s \$3.6 million dollars.
 - The first guy is entrusted with \$3.6 million dollars

2. The second guy is entrusted with 2 talents.
 - What's 2 x \$720,000? It's \$1.44 million dollars.
 - The second guy is entrusted with nearly \$1.5 million.
3. And the third guy is given 1 talent so he's given \$720,000.

At this point, let me just pause for a moment to say that if you are ever going on a long trip, and you need someone to hold onto your \$3.6 million dollars, I'm your guy. I am here for you. I will not bury it in the ground! I may not be able to double your investment but I'll make sure there's a real nice return waiting for you. Or, you might consider the Endowment of St. John in the Wilderness. It supports the ministry of this church. It's professionally managed and since the recession in 2009, it has averaged nearly 9% returns.

But, seriously, let me ask you this question now that we have done that math, how would you feel if you left \$3.6 million dollars with the church and you came back five years later to see what we had done with it, and we hadn't done a single thing. You'd probably have some questions about that. No ministry was started? No local folks in poverty were given a better place to live or a better way to make a living? No new building projects completed? In five years? You'd probably throw me into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth... *because you had entrusted us with so much.*

But there's another thing about this parable. I'm not sure we can say this is what Jesus intended in telling this little story that day in Jerusalem but somehow I think it's the Holy Spirit at work over the ages in bringing the Gospel to us. Here's what it is: *We get the English word "talent" from this parable.* Think about that for a second. This ancient Roman unit of financial measurement known as a "talent" from this Bible story evolved into modern English so that your talents are understood as God-given gifts which are entrusted to you for the building up the Kingdom and for the good of the world. You can re-read the entire parable as though each servant has been entrusted with talents – with skills and abilities – that are not to be hoarded or protected but invested, grown, and put to work.

That's the real math that I want us to do today. How would you put a pencil to paper to add up the talents that you have been given by God? How do you do the math on the gifts that God has given you? What kind of return is God getting for entrusting us with so many talents? How will it add up when it's time to settle accounts?

I think there are certain questions that Christians must constantly ask themselves and one of those questions has to be,

“What ministry is God calling me to right now?”

“What ministry is God calling St. John in the Wilderness to now?”

We have to constantly ask and re-ask these questions. We are constantly discerning, seeking the Holy Spirit to guide us to use the talents we have been given for the building up of the Body of Christ and the sharing of God’s love with each other, our neighbors, and our enemies.

What is God calling you to right now?

I think Frederick Beuchner framed this the best out of anyone in history when he wrote that God is calling you to where your joy intersects with the needs of the world. Think about that for a second. What is God calling you to right now? To work in the place where the needs of the church or the world intersect with what brings you joy.

I ask every high school student heading off to college this question. It’s not, “What do you want to do with your life?” It’s not, “So, what career interests do you have?” It’s not, “So, what do you think you’re going to major in?” Because those questions have nothing to do with the Kingdom of God, do they? There’s no sense asking the elementary school kid, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” as if their gifts are of their own making. No, we ask young people, “What do you think God is calling you to do with your life?” We ask them, “How can you use your gifts to bring healing and wholeness to this tired old world?”

And I used to think those were just questions for young people or for people discerning a call to ordained ministry but even as I grow older and even as someone who is already a priest, I’m still asking and listening and searching for what God is calling me to do now, with the gifts I have been given. These are timeless questions and here, as the Body of Christ, we get to discern our callings together and we get to live them out also as a church family.

Our talents are not our own. They are gifts entrusted to us by the one who loves us and invites us to share in the creative and redemptive work of Christ Jesus. It’s not about earning God’s love; you are already beloved by God. It’s about living into who we are meant to be. Let’s do some math on that. It’s a different kind of math. It’s church math! Spiritual math! It’s going to add up to a whole lot of talent. The Church has got talent! The question is, “What is God calling you to right?”