

“An Inescapable Part of Christian Discipleship”

Matthew 25:14–30

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You may have noticed that the text we have read from Matthew 25 or one like it seems to show up every year about this time, a parable about the stewardship of resources right when we are in the midst of a stewardship emphasis. What a surprise!

As most of you know, I do not choose the texts most Sundays. I follow the Revised Common Lectionary which is compiled by clergy from numerous Christian traditions. But the dependable appearance of such texts now is not an accident. Most churches are working on raising pledges for next year’s budget right about this time, and we all want to complete this task before the high holy days of Thanksgiving, Advent, and Christmas. So, the lectionary editors include these texts.

And the truth is stewardship is a practical need for every church. Financial resources are required for almost everything we do. But even more importantly, living as good stewards of all that has been entrusted to us is an inescapable part of Christian discipleship.

In all three parables we are considering in Matthew 25, Jesus is talking about what is most important in God’s realm. Here he is talking about talents— not abilities, but a kind of currency. The term *talanton* originally referred to a measure of weight but eventually referred to silver coins worth a lot of money. One denarius is a laborer’s daily wage in this time. A talent is worth roughly 6,000 danarii. Thus, one talent, the least received in trust by the three slaves, would be worth about twenty years wages for an average worker.

So, as the parable talks about what these three slaves do with a large sum of money entrusted to them and how the master responds when he returns from a trip, we are clearly talking about money and what we do with it. But since this is a parable about the kingdom of heaven or realm of God, it is about much more than money. It is about what we do with all that we have and are.

What Jesus is saying here about God's realm begins with an assumption, a rather pivotal one—we are stewards of all that we have and are, not owners. In the parable, there is one master, representing Jesus or God. There are three slaves, servants, or workers. And all the talents entrusted to the slaves while the master is away belong to the master. The slaves are temporary custodians of these resources, stewards, caretakers. They are not owners.

The implication is that in God's realm, it all ultimately belongs to God. Whatever we have in the way of financial resources, personal abilities, relationships, or anything else are gifts from God not to be hoarded or used for exclusively selfish purposes, but to be used for or shared with others and to the glory of God.

It is an assumption that is basic for Christian faith, but it is a concept that goes against the grain of American culture, especially when it comes to finances. *What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine, if I am smart enough to take it!* This is what we say. *I earned everything I have. I pulled myself up by my bootstraps. Nothing was given to me!*

And on one level of analysis, this may appear to be true. But none of us got where we are by ourselves. Some of us were more privileged than others. But we all had people who helped us along the way, encouraged us, gave us insight, shared hard truths with us so that we could learn and grow. And even to the extent that we may have life-empowering qualities, creative genius or the capacity for diligence and hard work, where did we get these qualities? We did not create them ex nihilo. They were gifts, like the people in our lives who made us better.

Understanding this makes a difference for how we use our resources. In regard to financial matters specifically, not just what we give to the church but how we use all our money, if we think it is ours in every way, we may part with it grudgingly. We may adopt the spirit of Scrooge or we may just think only of ourselves, but either way we unapologetically make our decisions solely on the basis of self-interest.

But if we realize that while we own certain things in terms of this-world standards, and we are the ones who pay taxes on them, in a larger sense, we are only stewards of gifts from God, we have a different perspective. We are grateful for these gifts, and so what we share with

others is an expression of gratitude, and we share it generously, thus giving meaning to our theme — Giving Generously with Gratitude.

I have often noted that the only time we smile when we see our money walking away from us is when a young child in our church leads the presentation of our offerings, as Remi will do later in this service. And I say this only somewhat facetiously because we do tend to want to hold on to things. But the truth is if we understand the source of all we have and thus our role as stewards, we smile whenever what God has entrusted to us is used for others.

We enjoy spending money more when we are spending it on others, people we know and love, and we enjoy spending money most when we are using it to help others — enabling children and youth to learn about God’s love and Christ’s calling to service, helping the hungry and homeless to find food and shelter, enabling glorious music to be experienced or art, theater and dance to flourish. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive, especially when we realize the Source of our resources and our role as stewards.

In the context of this basic, life-altering assumption, Jesus then says that our calling is to do something with what has been entrusted to us. In the parable, there is no comparative sense of faithfulness. One slave receives five talents, another two, and the other one, but how much anyone has is not a measure of faithfulness. The master offers the same exact words of praise for the slave who turns two talents into four as he does for the one who turns five talents into ten, “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.”

The only slave who does not receive a word of praise is the one who buries his one talent, he says because he knows the master is a harsh man, reaping where he does not sow. With no banks to speak of — the temple sometimes housed resources — burying money was a fairly common practice, as it still is for some. I think of over seven hundred Civil War era gold coins found recently in a cornfield in Kentucky. They were buried as a means of protection, and the endeavor was successful. They remained hidden for nearly 160 years!

But in Jesus' parable, simply protecting a resource, preserving the status quo, is not enough. It doesn't matter how much we have, there is no comparative sense of faithfulness, but we are called to do something with what is entrusted to us, make something of it, produce more with it.

Given the details of the parable, we might think of maximizing investments. The finance committee is trying to do that with our endowment funds. We want to protect what we have, but we want to do more because maximizing our returns is just good stewardship.

In like manner, the work of the facilities assessment committee, and more recently the Dream Team, has been to view our buildings and land in a similar way. We want to care for what we have, but we also want to leverage this location not for financial gain but to enhance our ministry to the community.

There is no question that we have inherited much here in the way of buildings and a rich heritage of ministries and mission efforts. We are known as a thoughtful community that addresses human needs and gives witness to a compassionate God. Our sanctuary is a sign of something sacred, something enduring for all around us. Our clothing ministry is known throughout the city. We have a long history of affirming women in ministry, engaging in multicultural work, and building ecumenical and interfaith relationships. And all of this has come to us as a gift from God and the saints who have come before us.

Recently during a Wednesday stewardship message, Sam Carothers credited former interim pastor Doug Aldrich with saying we are parking on someone else's nickel. We'd have to update that to someone else's two dollars or five dollars or more, and use the old methods of parking payment not tied to a license plate number. But the point is that like someone parking in a space with time already paid for, we experience blessings here that others have made possible.

We are indebted to them and God, and we want to preserve the richness of what they have left, but we want to do more than preserve it, if we are faithful to Jesus' teaching. In God's realm, in the Kingdom of Heaven, the calling is to do something with what we have – extend our ministries of compassion with a food truck and other possible partnerships in mental health, housing initiatives, and more; enhance our

physical space that it may serve more people and purposes; build even stronger relationships with those who are different from us; not simply bury what we have in fear of losing it.

This calling to do something with what has been entrusted to us applies to our individual lives too. We may think of our finances or personal abilities. How might they be used more for good? We may think of experiences we have had with people here, ministry we have received in the way of teaching or care. How can we pay forward our gratitude? We may even think of the blessings of living in this land, the freedoms we enjoy. How might we not simply preserve them but enhance them, make them even richer or stronger?

We are called to do something with what we have. Our gifts, resources, and efforts are not compared with anyone else's. What matters is what we do with what we have, but it does matter that we do something with what we have.

Michel Quoist put it this way (*Prayers*, p. 23).

The bricklayer laid a brick on the bed of cement.
Then, with a precise stroke of his trowel, spread another layer
And, without a by-your-leave, laid on another brick.
The foundations grew visibly,
The building rose, tall and strong, to shelter men (and women).

I thought, Lord, of that poor brick buried in the darkness at
the base of the big building.
No one sees it, but it accomplishes its task, and the other bricks
need it.
Lord, what difference whether I am on the rooftop or in the
foundations of your building, as long as I stand faithfully
at the right place?

That is our calling in regard to all we have and are.