

## **“Understanding God, Understanding Giving”**

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
November 13, 2011*

*Matthew 25:14-30*

Our passage for this morning is one of four parables from the end of Jesus' public teaching in the Gospel of Matthew, just before the events of his passion and death unfold. So, on the theory that you save the best or most important for last, the parables Jesus tells here might be regarded as pretty significant. Today's text is the third of four parables that Jesus tells in succession, and each of them make a slightly different point. The first story contrasts a wise servant with a wicked servant, both of whom are put in charge of things while the master is away. Jesus says that the wise servant will be at work, taking care of things, when his master returns. That one will be rewarded with being put in charge of all the master's possessions. But the foolish servant, knowing that the master is delayed, will decide to beat his fellow servants and eat and drink with drunkards. That servant will be punished. The first parable in the series is about keeping your nose to the grindstone.

The second parable is about wise and foolish bridesmaids. Five remember to bring oil for their lamps, so they are ready for the wedding banquet even when the master is delayed. Their oil does not run out. The other five forget to bring extra oil. Thus their lamps are not trimmed and burning when the groom arrives and they are shut out and can't go to the banquet. You don't know the day and the hour the groom will arrive, so you had better be prepared, Jesus says. You'd better be ready to go to the party. The second parable is about being ready, sensing the urgency, recognizing that we don't have all the time in the world. You never know when an opportunity to encounter God might arise, and it doesn't have to be the end of time.

Next comes our parable for today, about three different servants who are entrusted with talents (sums of money) by their master. And the parables conclude with the story of the King dividing the sheep from the goats on the basis of how they responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, and those in prison - even though they didn't realize that it was the king they were tending to when they served each of those groups. The last parable is about what service to the God we know in Jesus Christ looks like.

In today's parable, take note of several things. First, the man calls three servants, and gives them talents (sums of money). He gives to each of them according to their ability. And when he returns from his journey, he calls each of them to account. Pay attention to what each servant says when he is called forward. And pay attention to what the master says in response to them. And when we get to the third servant, don't let the response of the master throw you too much - I'll deal with that in the body of the sermon.

***'For 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.”***

I had a shocking realization this past week. I realized that in my nearly twenty years of ordained ministry, I have never yet preached a sermon on the parable of the talents. That is not because I haven't had the opportunity. I have by and large been a lectionary preacher, and the parable from Matthew comes around every three years, so I would have had a shot at it twice already since I've been here - 2008 and 2005. And it would have come up in 2002, 1999, 1996, and 1993. Add to that the fact that the parable of the talents is a stock text for “stewardship sermons”, and it is really quite amazing I haven't addressed it even one time from the pulpit. As Yogi Berra says, “You could look it up.”

I think the reason why is at least twofold. One, on the face of things, the parable is all about money (a talent was money measured in weight, and scholars say a talent would have been equal to about fifteen years wages - that's a lot of money, a talent). For years I was uncomfortable talking about money in church. In the earliest years, knowing that many of the people I would be talking to would get just as squirrely about the topic of money as I did, I'd basically avoid it, find a text that took a different tack, one that wasn't so direct, maybe focused on giving thanks to God, or being a joyful giver, without actually dwelling too much on “filthy lucre”. This had the advantage of steering clear of controversy and helping me not be accused of talking too much about money. I also made sure to remind people of the very real and very important truth that we can give in all kinds of ways, not just with financial gifts. That is really true and really important. But this strategy of avoidance of talking about money had the disadvantage of failing to quite hit head on what is a vital part of our lives - and our spiritual lives - how we handle the material resources we possess, what we do with them, what we do with our money.

In that regard, I have over the years become convinced that Philip Newell is right when he says that “Matter matters.” Bodies matter, the Earth matters, *matter* matters. Because matter matters, money matters. And as Judith and I have grown in our own faith, we have become a good bit bolder and even sacrificial in our own financial giving. We understand that giving back a portion of what we have been given in order to express gratitude to God and bless other people as we have been blessed is a deeply spiritual issue - but it is one that has material implications. It means we live on less. We drive different cars than we might. We have a different sized television set than we might - and it is not even a flat screen!

The dollars we give back to the work of the church are a spiritual matter, but they are also a *material investment* in providing food for people's bodies and souls, allowing curriculum and supplies to be purchased and the buildings where we meet to be kept up; ensuring that the helping

organizations we give benevolence funds can do their work and that a staff which helps all of you and me carry out the mission of the congregation gets fairly compensated, and so forth. It takes financial resources to carry on the work of the church.

Ultimately, of course, what any of us does with the material resources we have (or with the time and talents we possess) is a personal issue between us and God. It is just between us and God. It is not between us and the church. So I've been intrigued by a friend of mine who suggested that it might be helpful to engage in a visualization as we come forward next Sunday to bring our pledges. You might also try this as you write checks to Immanuel or for that matter to the charities you support through the year. Imagine that instead of just placing a pledge in a bowl, or a check in the plate or in an envelope, imagine that you are stepping forward to encounter God (however you understand God) in that moment. You are looking into the face of God's love embodied for you and me and the world and saying, "Thank you. Thank you. Here is an expression of my gratitude to you for all I have been given." It is that kind of understanding which drives what Tom Ehrlich and others have called "harvest giving" - the approach that sets aside the first fruits of what we have been given, and not the leftovers, for God's work in the world.

That brings me to the second reason I've always avoided preaching on the parable of the talents. I don't really care for the portrait of God it provides, at least when the story comes to the third servant. If God is the master in the parable, then I don't like what the master does when it comes to the third servant. I mean all the slave is doing is playing it safe with what he has been given. He buries it instead of investing it. I understand that. Who among us hasn't occasionally wanted to play it safe? Isn't that a sound strategy sometimes? I know we have people here who work in financial planning. Financial planners help us invest. But isn't it sometimes a sound strategy to play it safe? Does playing it safe really justify being thrown out into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth?

And by the way, I never hear about gnashing of teeth without thinking about the story of what Krister Stendhal, the Swedish theologian who taught at Harvard for years, said when he was asked by a student what would happen to those who died without any teeth. No gnashing for them, right? Stendahl looked the student right in the eye and said, "Teeth will be provided!"

The story of the talents has always troubled me until I noticed that the third servant, the one with the one talent, the one whom the Master has thrown out into the outer darkness, starts out his address to the Master differently than the first two. That's when it occurred to me that the servants had utterly different theologies, totally different understandings of the master. Let's go back and think about the story again:

The Master calls the servants to account for the talents to which he has entrusted them. The first two - the one who has been given five and the one who has been given two - step forward in turn and begin by saying, "Master, you handed over to me this number of talents." And then they go on to describe what they've done with those talents, and they subsequently receive praise.

I want you to notice something. The very first words out of the mouths of servant number one and servant number two suggest that they first and foremost understand the Master as a giver, someone who has handed great resources and responsibility over to them. The one with the five and the one with the two talents both seem to understand that they've been given much and they rise to the occasion. And because they do, the Master commends them and says, "***Enter into the joy of your Master.***"

Ever since I read Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers* this past summer, I've been haunted by it. I can't get out of my mind just how fortunate - or to put it theologically, how blessed - I really am. I also can't shake the sense that nobody gets to where you and I are on his or her own. There is no doubt some hard work was involved on all of our parts, but we have all, every single one of us, had the benefit of circumstances in our lives conspiring on our behalf. If it wasn't the families in which we grew up, it was other people who came into our lives to encourage and to mentor us. I love what Gene Methvin says about such things. He says that he was smart enough to pick a really good set of parents. We've almost all had the benefit of getting a higher education that many others just didn't receive - they didn't have the financial or intellectual resources to receive it. The vast majority of us were born in the Western hemisphere, or in Westernized countries; almost all of us were born in the United States. In countless ways, we have been given advantages that other people did not have. We really are five talent, or at least two talent, people. Really and truly recognizing that - and how much of that is just plain gift, just plain pure grace - means seeing that God (or the universe, if you want to phrase it that way) is a giver.

Contrast their view with the perspective of the servant with the one talent. The first words out of his mouth are not, as in the case of the other two, "Master, you handed over to me this many talents," but "Master, I knew you to be a harsh man." Maybe he says that because he already knows he is going to be called on the carpet, but rather than seeing the master as a Giver who could be trusted and One who trusted him, he saw the master primarily as someone to be feared. So instead of taking that one talent and doing something with it, he buried it. He hid it. He played it safe.

There are any number of potential explanations for this behavior. Perhaps he was resentful that the master didn't give him more responsibility (but remember, one talent was fifteen year's wages, so that was not a small amount). Maybe he was locked into the "compare and despair" game. It is always possible to compare ourselves to others who have more than we do. But his approach to the master was based in fear and anxiety, and not in trust. Because his approach to God and life is based in fear and anxiety, the third servant gets not, "Enter into the joy of your Master," but instead, "Cast him out into the outer darkness." (His theology, his understanding of God, determines what he receives. So we need to be careful when we construct our theologies). The spiritual truth is this, and I stand by it: *Love and generosity lead to joy and productivity and deep meaning even in the face of life's pain; fear, anxiety, and grasping create for us a world of isolation, shriveled possibility, and narrowing options.* That's just the truth.

Now before you say, "Okay, that's fine. But the servant with one got gypped, he has every reason to be resentful and fearful, he was only given one talent," let's remember that some of the most generous, some of the most kind people in the world are those who have very little. I've met some of them. I've stayed under their roof.

It is also possible to be given great gifts - materially, spiritually, emotionally - and not invest them in anything beyond ourselves. It is possible to hoard what we've been given. But true joy comes in investing of ourselves: our time, our talent, and yes, our treasure...

If you listened to Philip Newell last Sunday during the 10:10 education hour, you've already heard this marvelous story. If you didn't hear Philip between services last week, you need to hear this story. It is a story about his dog. I won't tell the last part, which is really sad and weepy. I'll just deal with my big takeaway from the story: what it communicated about what it means to be created in the image of God.

Rev. Newell talked with us about their family dog, Joe. They had Joe with them when they lived on the island of Iona. Joe, in Celtic or Gaelic, means “spark of life.” This dog was a Border collie. What Newell said, and you will know if you’ve ever had one, is that border collies live for, they thrive on, rounding things up. Rounding animals up, rounding people up, they just love to round things up.

Every Wednesday on the island of Iona, the people who come there on a pilgrimage go on what they call a “pilgrimage walk.” It’s a seven-mile walk around the tiny island, and groups of nearly one hundred people go on it. And every Wednesday morning, Joe the dog would get so excited he’d just start quivering all over. He knew this was the day he was going to do what he was created to do. He was going to get to round people up. And Joe would be so happy on that seven mile walk. For seven miles, he’d keep the group together. And Newell said when groups would come to the end of the pilgrimage walk every Wednesday they’d always end up in a great big circle. And Joe would go into the center of the circle, and he would fall asleep, in blissful rest.

A friend told Philip, “You know why that is, don’t you? Because Joe knew he had finished his work. He’d done what he was created to do.” Newell says that all of us are born, like Joe, with that innate instinct to round things up, to be about the work of unity. It is, he says, what it means to be created in the image of God.

We are, all of us, created in the image of God, who is a giver. So giving of our time, talents and treasure is not just a good idea. It is not just what helps the church do its work. It is not just a way to bless others. It is what we are created to do because we are created in the image of God.

A little more than a month ago, I picked up one of those blue Immanuel 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary shopping bags. You may remember that the Community Service and Action Committee sponsored a drive in honor of the 50<sup>th</sup> to fill up 50 of those blue bags with non-perishable groceries to help restock the food pantry at SHARE. So I picked up a bag, and in the back of my mind I thought I’d do what I always do whenever I take a tag off the Tag Tree at Christmas time or take part in one of the CS& A drives. I always hand the responsibility for such things over to Judith.

As the deadline drew nearer (and in fact it had just passed), I noticed that Judith hadn’t done anything about filling the bag. So I went to the Giant. I walked through the aisles with my list of items for SHARE. I picked out some peanut butter. I tried to decide which jelly people would most want (grape is standard, but maybe some families would want strawberry). I found some other staples. I added a roll of paper towels to the bag. I thought about what sort of cereal might appeal to people and grabbed a box of that. Something happened to me that day. I went in feeling ho-hum, and I came out jazzed. I want to suggest that what happened in that store is this: **I entered into the joy of my master.**

In Jesus’ name.

*Amen.*

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