

As I said last week, the Gospel writer, Matthew, is known to talk more than the other gospel writers about final judgment, especially for those who fail to translate words into actions. Most of us find Jesus' parables to be a bit confusing anyway so why add to the confusion by having what sounds like such harsh judgment? For some of us, it's enough to close our Bibles and skip over this parable altogether or to take on a more comfortable interpretation of this parable. But let's not do that. Let's live in the tension for a while. I admitted last week, and I will again today that I'm uncomfortable with assigning God the master character in today's parable. And some scholars have chosen to assign the third slave the role of Jesus. However, when I look at the context here we have the third of three judgment parables in a row. It is a parable that is often taken out of context. For example, some say that it justifies a gospel of economic prosperity; it does not. Others say that Jesus was continuing to tick off the authorities, hence the third slave role. But I wonder in following suit with these other parables if Jesus wasn't trying to continue to make and grow disciples- not waste any precious, remaining time. That's why I am choosing to interpret today's parable with God as the Master. This parable takes place as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem to face persecution and death on the cross. He knows what's coming and though he's told the disciples; they don't get it. Maybe this is one of those "come to Jesus" talks? We all know that Jesus was and is a champion of the least advantaged. "The Gospels report his advocacy and care for the left out, the pushed down, the little: children, women, the poor, the sick, the designated sinners. This commitment finds expression in his parables, which often give a celebrated role to an

outcast or despised figure- a tax collector, a Samaritan, a widow denied justice, a failed son, etc. The parable before us, however, is a singular exception. Here it is the one with the least who loses” (Paul Simpson Duke, *The Parables*). And reading through Matthew’s Gospel, one begins to pick up that most parables likely end with a person or group condemned for being foolish or wicked (like last week’s Parable of the Bridesmaids). Today’s parable appears in both Matthew and Luke’s Gospels though they differ quite a bit. In Luke’s version it’s called the Parable of Pounds, whereas here in Matthew’s version it’s called the Parable of Talents. Before turning to God’s word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I’ve quoted before a poem, entitled, “The Summer Day,” by Mary Oliver. The last line of the poem is posed to the reader as a question: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* As we reflect upon this question, let’s look closer at this parable. When thinking of the Gospel of Matthew and this parable, the Sermon on the Mount should come to mind. “That is, what you do with what you have been given is never, ever, for your benefit alone, but for the sake of the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, so that we might actually embody the promise of Immanuel- being the salt of the earth and the light of the world” (Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.org). It’s hard when reading this parable not to get caught up in making an economic connection. But this scripture overall is not about the economy...yes, Jesus uses economic terms metaphorically to look at the

bigger picture. And the bigger picture is about that with which God has entrusted these servants/us and what they/we choose to do with them.

Once upon a time a master, whom we may presume is God, called three of his slaves, his servants, and entrusted them with his property, represented here in talents. A talent equaled about 6,000 denarii. If one denarius was the daily pay for a common laborer, then **one talent, equaled 20 years' worth of wages. Five talents represented 100 years' worth of wages** (Duke). We're talking big money! Matthew goes big when it comes to assigning wealth, whereas in Luke's version of the parable, everyone gets the same, smaller amount. In Matthew's version the Master gives each servant talents differing amounts according to their ability. Now that doesn't seem fair, does it? At least that's how we've been trained to look at this scenario in our society- we compare ourselves to others- we become jealous when others have more talents than we do- we feel sorry for ourselves- we covet what others have, and join "the grass is always greener on the other side" club. We focus on the talents we see in other people, rather than investing in our own God-given talents. And then notice also that the master gives them no instructions. He just leaves them with these large sums of money. In Luke's version the master says, "Do business with these until I come back" (19:13). And then we get to the really uncomfortable part- the master's response to the third slave. Upon first listen, the parable of the Talents, portrays a master whose words and behavior seem far out of character with the God who freed the enslaved Israelites and the Jesus who healed the two blind men on the side of the road out of compassion

(Matt. 20:29-34). However, if you take a second and third reading of this parable, you may begin to notice that the master is most generous, trusting, welcoming, and benevolent. “That is the way the narrator of the parable presents him; that is the way the first two slaves view him—otherwise they would not have been so free to risk and act— and that is the way the master conducts himself. Could it be that the one-talent slave has badly misjudged the master, distorting the master into a tough, uncaring ruler, and has foolishly acted accordingly” (Long)?

Maybe that’s what I’m intrigued by the third slave? I wonder if it’s also because he’s the one I relate most to in this story. Yeah, we’d all like to claim that we’re always like the first two slaves, trusting that God is enough...that we are enough. And yet, if I’m honest, it’s the third slave who speaks more to me. He’s really honest about why he digs a hole and hides his God-given talent. He’s afraid. He’s afraid of the harshness of the master so he tries to protect what the master gave him by burying the talent in the ground. Though that practice may seem odd to us today, it was actually common at this time to bury treasure. This talent that he hides though is not even his— really— and yet, he wants to keep his master’s money safe. He’s trying to be a loyal servant...to be faithful...to do best by his master. He’s afraid though to take the risk. The risk to leap and invest in what he’s been given by the master. Instead of rejoicing in and with what God has entrusted him and being fruitful, like the third slave, we go and dig a hole and hide. We accuse others and insulate ourselves. “Master, I knew you were a harsh man...reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed”

(v. 24). We fool ourselves with our limited perceptions and distrust of the master. We also tell ourselves that the burying method is the safest...that we are being faithful to the master- to keep on digging our holes- when in fact, this is the opposite of faithfulness. The truth still stands: we have one wild and precious life. An amazing gift to us from God. I don't know about y'all, but it seems that Jesus' point here is that the worst we can do with what God has given us is NOTHING! We make all these excuses. We say we trust in God's steadfastness and provision but when the rubber meets the road, reality sets in. Bills have to be paid. We say we'll have to wait until retirement and over the years, that promise fades. We keep digging holes and hiding our talents. It's become a habit- a survival mechanism. We limit ourselves. **Fear becomes our master. Money becomes our master.** Something other than God dictates who and whose we are.

At a gathering this week, I was sitting at a table, talking with a woman. The irony is that we had just the day before heard Nick Burns (aka Ninja Picasso), the mural artist, give an impassioned speech about why he paints and how he has grown in his faith through this Greenville Homeless Alliance mural project. He was alive! No, he isn't rich by the world standards, but he gives all glory to God for the honor of being able to do what he loves and to shine Christ's light and share God's love with others. Back to my conversation with this woman: she began to tell me about her love of art and how she enjoyed painting and drawing. As she sat at the lunch table and talked with me about painting, her face lit up. She became alive. I shared with her that it sounded like art was her

calling...her passion. Indeed, it was. She confirmed this as she lowered her head and looked down at her feet- the look of joy dissipating from her face. And I think to myself at this very moment- here's the very darkness in the text- the weeping and gnashing of teeth. I shared with her the words of theologian Howard Thurman. He says, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs to people who have come alive." The thing that makes this woman most alive- she has gone and dug herself a hole and buried it. Choices have consequences. The consequences when we don't use what God gives us are for others, as God's mission is mercy and justice. In other words, who is going to pay the price for our fear and inaction? The people who are suffering and need mercy and justice. That's right- and when we bury the very thing that makes us come to life- when we dig holes and bury it- when we deny our gifts; we deny God- and God's people- and this makes us dead inside. Looking up at me, her eyes filled with tears, she lamented how afraid she was to invest in her painting. She was afraid to let go of what she deemed as "security" and to rejoice in her God-given gift.

Friends, "the tragic news of this parable is that the one-talent man pronounces his own judgment; he gets only the master his tiny and warped vision can see. In theological terms, he gets the peevish little tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about living with the consequences of one's own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God, one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life and can

discover the joy of God's providence everywhere" (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*). Yet, living in bounty, life in the here-and-not yet of God's kingdom on earth, the realm of generous accountability, proves harder than we expect. Faithful risking and trusting in a generous God is hard. "So much has been entrusted to us. Turning away from life, refusing to risk the joy of becoming- this is what leads to the abyss of outer darkness. Here, where regret and disappointment dwell, is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. Each time we banish another of the gifts we have been given, we add to the chasm separating us from the God who is our true home" (Kayla McClurg, *Passage By Passage: A Gospel Journey*).

"At the end of the day, judgment in this parable means an acute awareness of God. An awareness of God's presence. An awareness of God's promise to God's creation. An awareness of God's justice and mercy. An awareness of God's insistence that a commitment to being the salt of the earth and the light of the world really, really matters" (Lewis). When tempted this week and in the weeks thereafter with digging holes, practice joyous freedom under great grace. Enter into the joy of your master and you will come alive! Thanks be to God! Amen.