

# “Put Your Talent to Work”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, November 19, 2017

## 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

## Matthew 25:14-20

*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."*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've read from Your sacred scripture and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of God. And let that word do its work within us, among us, and through us in order that we might be Your faithful people now and forever. Amen.

I've always heard the parable of the talents of sort of watching three people line up before a king or someone of stature sitting on a throne or on a high chair. The first person comes up and the king grabs five things out of a bag and says, "Here are your five talents." And then that person goes away. And the next person takes two talents from the master. And the last one gets one and puts it in his pocket or his satchel or whatever, and just kind of goes about his business for a while. Five talents, two talents, and one talent. It's obvious what God wants us to do in this story, to take the talents and put them to work. In order that they might be doubled for God's goodness, we might hear those famous words, "Well done to you who have gotten good work. You've got to get more things now and be in charge of more stuff." All of it seems so simple and compact. But then I started to really dig into it this year. And I was looking at the margins of the passage. I wanted to understand

kind of what was happening just before, and just after, and kind of around this story.

The story of The Talents comes in the middle of a long discourse that Jesus is offering to his disciples who want to know when the end time is near. "What are the signs? When will we know for sure?" And Jesus tells them after they ask this question, "Beware that no one leads you astray because many will come in my name and they will tell you that they have the Gospel or that they're the Messiah, that they're a prophet and don't follow them." And then he tells stories about keeping awake because you don't know when the time is going to come. You know the story about the 10 lamps, the bride's maids who are waiting with the lamps. This story is about staying awake. And after the Parable of the Talents, Jesus says to the disciples, "Stay awake. Stay awake and pray for me. Stay awake because you do not know when the time of trial will come. The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." It is in the midst of this dialogue about understanding when the end times are coming that Jesus shares this parable of the talents.

Now, during the 9:05 service, which is a little less formal than this one, I was able to ask the congregation if anybody had a dollar bill, two dollar bills, and a five. Believe it or not, they trusted me enough to hand it over. I got a dollar from one person, two dollars from a visitor, and a five dollar bill from someone else. I randomly picked three people in the congregation and said, "Here Brad Gift, you get five talents. And Kirk Hutchinson, you get two and, here Annie Monroe, you only get \$1 and you got to stay in your seat and don't do anything. I told Brad and Kurt, please go multiply this. And rather than preach, I just watched them walk around and talk to people and people were even sitting far away waving \$2 or a \$5 bill. Kathy Smith made the mistake of mentioning out loud that she had a \$20 so I said, "Hey, go over that way. Let's make sure we get that one." And within minutes I said, "Okay, come back and tell me, how have you multiplied your talents?" Brad who had \$5, counted out that he had raised or multiplied that to \$37. Kirk, who had just the two \$2 came back with \$36 and poor Annie, who I made sit in her seat, still had the \$1. \$74, not a bad investment.

Do you know what a talent is? How much money it is that's active in this parable? Do you know what Jesus is talking about? Again, I've always thought that it was like one thing or two things or five things. But let me give you a little bit of the math. 1 talent in today's dollars is \$229,000. 2 talents is 459,000 and 5 talents is \$1,147,500. So the master is not just giving out little bobbles for these servants to play with. This is serious money. The master trusts these servants and wants them to act as if it's their own and to carry the weight of that into all that they do. \$1,147,500 is what the very first person got for five talents. That person goes out, doubles that amount, and returns to the master with \$2,295,000, 100% return on investment. The one with two talents did the same and came back with \$918,000, 100% return on investment. And then we know what Annie did. She sat in her chair, didn't do anything, and came back with the same amount, zero return on investment. The two who got praised return 100% and the one who gets the harsh words, nothing.

But what's important to realize is we think around the edges of this story is that each of them start with zero. The one with one talent, two talents, or five talents, all of them start with nothing. And it's also important to remember that each of them end with nothing. They give it all back to the master. So maybe this story isn't so much about money or talents in the sense of what we can do but it's about all of who we are. It's about our entire life, the gifts that each of us get by being alive and being a person of faith. It is everything about who we are. And the invitation for us, given that this parable is embedded in the, when is the last time coming? When are the end times coming? Is that we are not to hide or be afraid but we are supposed to take what we have and put it to work and double the kingdom any way that we can risk of our lives and our passion and our treasure and our talent and our time. To risk all of who we are in order to do the right thing and to be a good person. This is what Jesus is trying to get us to realize. And I don't know if you heard it, but the reason that the one buried the talent and returned it back to the master without any addition or multiplication was because he

thought the master was harsh. Reaping where the master did not sow. Gathering where the master did not scatter. So I was afraid. I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours. I was afraid.

I hear the angel Gabriel coming to the Virgin Mary. Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. I hear Jesus talking to the disciples after he's resurrected. Unrecognized, coming into a locked room where they're gathered, terrified about what's going on. Peace I give you, do not be afraid. Again, and again, and again the gospel is proclaimed in these simple words, do not be afraid. Imagine what God could do you with you if you gave everything you are over to God and allowed God to work with you, and work through you, and make a difference when you were not afraid. The amount of money in this parable is staggering and it makes us realize that what Jesus is talking about is that everything we have belongs to God. We come into this world with nothing, we're going to go out with nothing. So the question is what do we do with what we have? Are we willing to risk and put it to work for the kingdom or do we hide it because we're afraid of judgment? We're afraid of what the master will say at the end when we're called forth to give a reckoning. It is not just the blessings of life, the good things, the talents, the treasures, the time that we have. There are people who take what God has given them and transformed them into goodness in different ways. I want to offer a couple examples of what it means to take the talent that God has given us and have it be multiplied for the goodness of the kingdom.

Stan Hays is a champion barbecue pitmaster, makes some of the best brisket on Earth. In 2011, there was a natural disaster, a tornado near where he lived, and he decided he was going to start serving some meals. The response was so great to the fact that he was serving barbecue to the relief workers and to the survivors of the disaster that he started a nonprofit called Operation BBQ Relief. And since 2011, he has served 1.7 million free meals to those who were hungry. Jennifer Maddox is a cop on Chicago South Side. And finally growing tired of arresting juveniles and adolescents who were dealing drugs and having gunfights and doing all kinds of mischief, she decided to start an afterschool program for students, kindergarten through fifth grade. A program called Future Ties that creates a safe place for those kids to gather. Hopefully, so they don't get too indoctrinated into the terror and horror that's going on around them. Khali Sweeney is a man who grew up in inner-city Detroit. He owns a boxing gym. And he decided, based on the struggles and temptations that he faced, that he too wanted to create a safe place for students. And so he started the Downtown Boxing Gym Youth Program where 260 students have come to do homework, to have a meal, to have companions, to learn boxing and other skills. 260 have completed that program. All of them have graduated from high school and 98% of them have gone on to college. 98% of the inner-city kids in Detroit that have gone through this program are now in college. And finally, there's a young woman in San Antonio, Texas named Mona Patel. She's a smart young woman because she was a college student at 17 years old. One day, she was walking to class and a drunk driver came and ran up onto the sidewalk and hit her. It cost her her leg. After living with the chaos and the hurt and the terror and the uncertainty of an amputation, the hassles with insurance and rehabilitation and care, and feeling so different than everybody else, she decided to start the San Antonio Amputee Foundation to provide a safe place for people to come and talk about what it means to lose a limb.

It's not just the blessings that God gives us that God is inviting us to transform into goodness. It's also the heartaches and the struggles that God gives us that we can use in order to provide care and comfort to others. The servants of the master risked being engaged. The people who's stories I shared risked being engaged. My hope is that all of us, trusting in God's goodness, will risk being engaged. Amen.