

Sermon Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Now this parable of the talents is troubling. Why was the master of the story so angry at the man, who, out of fear, buried his talent in the ground? He didn't use it, but he didn't lose it either. There is a rabbi who said, “In the coming world, you will not be asked, ‘Why were you not Moses?’ You will be asked, ‘Why were you not you?’” The parable says the master knew each servant's abilities, and gave talents according to their abilities, not more, not less, but gave gifts according to their abilities, and expected a return on the gifts. Your life is a gift from God. Your days and hours and minutes are opportunities to give a return to God. We often speak disparagingly of people who waste their lives, but, you know, by criticizing those who waste, aren't we implying that we know what is worthy to spend our life upon? What is worthy of our time? Did you think your time was just for you? The love and forgiveness you were given in Jesus Christ are gifts from God. Have you multiplied them upon others? Have you passed it on? Did you think that that was just for you? You have talents and abilities to build up God's church. Have you?

So often Christian churches nurture musicians, and launch them on careers, and then they find out that there is more money and more fame on the secular side so they cross over, and they cease using their talents for God, and instead use it for themselves. Sometimes when we see that, we are critical. We say, “Look, look at them using all that God-given talent as if it were just for them to begin with!” You have talents, and you have abilities. Did you think it was just for you?

And your money! This parable and several others speak of a master who entrusts wealth to his servants with an expectation that they remember whose money it was and whose money it will be. You've been entrusted with some amount of money, at least for the short time you walk this earth. Did you think that it was just for you? This entire chapter of Matthew 25 warns that preparation is necessary, and that giving God a return on God's investment in you is necessary, and then it ends with compassion for others in need is necessary, and I say warns because judgment is on the other end of failure to prepare, failure to give God an expected return, and failure to show compassion to others. Fear is no excuse. You are and you have some unique part in God's plan. You may not be Moses, but you must be you – the you God entrusted and enabled and expected you to be. You are not here just for you. Do you think that playing it safe, and giving counsel to your fears, and cruising through life, keeping your head down and making hardly a wave or a wake was what God had planned for your whole life?

In the Peanuts cartoon, the Charlie Brown cartoon, years ago, Lucy asked Charlie Brown, “Why do you think we were put here on earth?” Charlie answered, “Well, to make other people happy.” Lucy starts thinking to herself, and she says, “I don't think I'm making anyone happy.” She gets angry, and she says, “But nobody's making me very happy either! Somebody's not doing their job!” Now, Lucy saw the problem, but then immediately saw it as somebody else's problem.

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When attendance is down, somebody's not doing their job! When children don't make it to Sunday School or youth don't make it to Youth Group, somebody's not doing their job! When the budget is down, somebody's not doing their job! When volunteers with talent fail to volunteer, somebody's not doing their job! We see the problem, but is it somebody else's problem, or is it fear or sloth or selfishness that keeps our gift wrapped and dusty on the shelf just for us, just in case we need them later on? We might as well bury them. Did you think you were here just for you?

That's not what Jesus taught, and that's not the way He lived before us. In Matthew 20:26, it says, “Whoever wishes to be great among you, must be a servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you, must be your slave.” Just as the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. You are important as a servant, as Jesus was.

Frederick Dietner said, “God created you simply because the party would not be complete without you.” God looked around the vast universe, and realized something was missing. That something was you. In great love and great care, God created you in order that the universe might be complete. What you are and what you have and how you love and how you show it are essential parts of God's plan. We spend our lives, if we spend them safely, unwrapping our gifts in ways we can use them.

Will Willimon suggests, “We do not know until we try how coordinated we are.” We do not know until we try how musically inclined we are, how strongly we can lift, how caringly we can listen, how well we can write, how articulately we can speak. Each new discovery about what we can do is a discovery about what God had in mind when God made us. We are a gift and a surprise, even to ourselves, sometimes when we try. Who we are, who we are made to be is up to God, but how we use what God has designed is up to us. The master of the parable is angry when, out of fear, his servant does nothing, just nothing at all, and expects that to be enough. He says, “Here, here's what's yours, I've kept it safe.” When we fail to use our talent, we fail not only the Master, we fail ourselves. Our lives are not complete, the lives of those around us are not complete if we don't let our lives speak or use what God has given us.

You know, in any bookstore, the most number of shelves are self-help books. The entire self-help industry is based upon the fact that most people walk around each day feeling a hole in their souls, wondering, “I have all these things. Why am I not happy? Isn't there something else that I should be doing?” Well, the answer is yes! We weren't made to operate on selfishness, and we weren't made to make decisions on fear. We were made to be motivated and to live according to faith and trust in God, the same God who has gifted us and emboldened us with salvation over sin and death so that we can live free from fear, and so that we can be useful to God, with our time, with our talents, and with our money. We were called to, and we can risk to love. We were called to and we can risk to forgive. We were called to and can risk to give generously of our time and our talents and our money because we know this. This is what we are made for, to give. Giving is what God has done so completely for us in Christ, and giving is what we are

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called to do in the name of Christ. Giving of our time and our talents and our money is a witness that we trust God. We trust God, and we witness that our faith has overcome our fear, has overcome our selfishness.

Life is a little bit like the game, Monopoly. You know, if you keep the money that you are dealt in the beginning, and you roll round and round the board, investing in nothing and buying nothing and taking no risks, you lose! You're out! You can't possibly do well if you put nothing at risk! We find pious ways to do nothing with our gifts, just as the Pharisees in the New Testament, that Jesus had so much trouble with, found pious ways to put nothing at risk. You know, there is a danger of theology out there, sort of a folk theology, which claims that its foundation is reverence for God's omnipotence. It sounds pious, and it sounds respectful of God, but taken to the extreme, it produces adherence to believe, for example, if God wants someone in sub-Saharan Africa to be freed from slavery or poverty or oppression, then, by gum, God is powerful enough to do that without my help. We don't need to worry, or do much of anything, just sit back and wait for an omnipotent God to see if we're on a selection list, which in the minds of those who hold this theology, always does include their own name. Some think if God wants someone fed, God will feed them. If God wants them saved, God will save them. They rationalize God does not need our cooperation, and it's a sin to think that we make any difference at all. That is clearly not what Jesus taught, and in this parable, fraught with possible misunderstanding, one thing is clear. God gives gifts, and expects us to use them, to build up God's Kingdom, God's Kingdom – not our own. That part is clear. Selfish use of God's gift is out of the question in the parable of the talents. What we have and what we are is for God's use, not our personal possessions to dole out dribs and drabs as crumbs fall from the table. We have gifts to greater and lesser degrees. We have abilities, and we have money, and we have time to greater and lesser degrees. God expects different returns on His investment from different people, but God will not accept nothing or no effort or no risk or no return because we were afraid. That will not do.

Remember, this parable was told to Jesus' disciples, and as Jesus' disciples, it is told to us today. We are the ones who have said, “I trust you God with all that I have and all that I am.” We are the ones who have said, “We understand that physical life here is short and separated from full understanding of God's plan.” We know enough to hold what we have here lightly, knowing that there is more. There is an eternity more to come. We are those people. Knowing all this, we must surmise that some part of God's intention, God's plan for building up His truth and Kingdom, not of this world, some part of Jesus' continuing ministry was meant to be done by you and me. God equipped us to do what we are called to do. We are able, and we have felt the urging to do more, and to reach out beyond our fear and beyond our self-centeredness. We have felt that, but do we? Do we? If we don't, then what part of God's plan for Greenwood or for our families or for our church's future or for our witness is not happening? Not happening, because we are afraid! What part of God's plan for here and now is not happening because we have rationalized or buried or hidden our talents and resources? You may say, “Wait a minute, wait a minute, Jim, you cannot thwart God's plan!” Well, there you go, now you've joined that group which says, “If God wants that done, it will happen, and God doesn't

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need us.” You need not worry or fret or spend a dime or a minute of your time or even cross the street. I say, “Wait a minute indeed!” You have been given gifts to use, says the parable, and God has invested in you, and expects a return. Some things will not happen if you do not overcome fear of failure and use and do and act and risk in God’s name.

You remember old, poor Lazarus in the parable from Luke, whom God desired to be fed. Poor Lazarus, under the rich man’s table, eating the scraps. Wasn’t God’s desire thwarted by the rich man, who stepped over him each day, who ignored him each day, and maybe the rich man was afraid he would need all his riches in retirement, and couldn’t spare a dime for Lazarus. When he died, in that teaching, Jesus says that God spoke harshly to the rich man, “You had your chance to respond and share and use what I gave you, and you ignored your opportunities, and you ignored Lazarus, and now it is too late.” If nothing were at stake, God would not be upset when we don’t use our talents. But something great is at stake. Who are we made to be? That is up to God. How we use what God has given us, that is up to us. To employ your talents is to be fully alive.

Thus, this warning in a poetic form by Amy Zimmer, “Beware my body and my soul, beware above all of crossing your arms, and assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator because life is not a spectacle.” Jesus describes the Kingdom of God. To each, something is given great or small, to each is entrusted, and each is needed. What is God giving, and what are you doing with it? What have you buried out of fear, some dream you decided was beyond you, some hope that you’ve given up on, some future that is better from your past, some ability you don’t know you have because you’ve been afraid to even try. What has God placed in your hands, and what does God want you to do with it, for God’s sake?

Every church I know, Main Street United Methodist included, is more prone to worry over doing too much rather than worrying that we are doing too little. What are we doing for God with what God has given us as a church? What are you doing for God with what God has given you personally? God doesn’t call us to be successful, but He does call us to be faithful. God will not ask you at the end of your life, I agree with the rabbi, why you are not Moses, but will ask you why you were not you with the potential that He knew He had a right to expect. Get out into the world, and become not just something, but **the** something you are uniquely qualified and gifted and equipped to be, a building block, a brick in God’s Kingdom. We should not be afraid of risking. We should instead be afraid of not risking, of not acting, of not laying ourselves on the line for God’s sake, as the children’s sermon said, of not sticking our neck out. The question, God’s question, as I see it in this parable, is what are you doing with what I gave you? What are you doing with what God gave you, for God’s sake? Amen.