

Talents and Treasure Changes Lives

1 Thessalonians 5: 1-11

Matthew 25:14-30

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Stewardship Sunday

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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 labor 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: 14-30

“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.’

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Do you hear the parable of the talents, of taking five and making five more, of taking two and making two more, and think, yep, I already know just where this Stewardship sermon is going before it even starts? Take what you have been given by God, how you have been blessed in your life, and make the absolute most of it in the ways that you help support the church and all of our ministries by your time, talent and treasure. After all, we do want to hear, 'enter into the joy of your Master.'

And yes, that is the traditional approach on Stewardship Sunday. It's almost as if Matthew had that direction in mind when he wrote his gospel to tell Jesus' parable.

But I want us to look at this familiar story *not* from the investing five and two servants who later entered into the joy of their master, but rather from the one single servant who buried his talent, who hid it in the ground. He was prudent, cautious and guarded. He was keenly aware that the Master was a harsh businessman who reaped where he did not sow, and gathered where he did not scatter seed. Being careful with the one talent he knew his Master would be angry if his principle was lost. Bury the talent, no liability for loss. Break even. No harm done. Nothing gained, but definitely nothing lost. That sounds like a very safe and smart thing to do.

When the Master returned the servant self-assuredly and confidently told him just what he had done and why, as he gave back what had been entrusted to him. He was expecting that he too would be rewarded with joy for not squandering or risking his Master's principle.

But then comes the twist in the story that must have stunned Jesus' listeners. And actually it stuns us too because it's a part of the story we tend to just pass by. We gloss over it, skip it altogether. We see a servant who made a practical, prudent and cautious financial decision from fear of failure who was thrown into the deep outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth, being tossed into absolute darkness? When we hear this parable and understand the Master as God who gives gifts, gives talents, that we are to be stewards of, how do we wrap our minds instead around this image when over and over we know God as steadfast love, as loving kindness, as merciful, as always forgiving and slow to anger?

Remembering that Jesus taught this parable near the end of his earthly ministry when he was summing up all that he had to teach makes a difference in how we understand the meaning of the Master's joy and the weeping and gnashing.

UCC pastor Casey Baggott¹ asks if this could be Jesus' way of saying to his disciples- as he anticipates the clash with authorities that will lead to this death- that he plans to go, having entrusted them with his treasure? Could it be his way of telling them that if they bury his message of God's loving kingdom, that he'll be very disappointed in them? Could he be declaring that if they have the confidence, the courage, the trust in themselves that he has in them, then they'll take the wealth of his love, his compassion, his goodness, his righteousness, and they'll take that wealth into the world to let it multiply?

If so, and I certainly believe that it is, then this is not so much a parable of *financial* acumen, after all, but rather a parable of *faith* acumen. We have been given the treasure of faith. Jesus teaches that we have it so we will invest it, not hiding the best of what we have, not being

prudent or cautious, not seeking our safety and security above all else. We will live out proper management of the treasure of our faith by taking risks for the sake of spreading and multiplying the good news of God's love.

When we hear the parable of the talents as a faith lesson we then do not hear it as a lesson focused on a Stewardship day or season, but rather on a *life* of faithful stewardship of all that we have been given, of using our talents of time and treasure wisely and generously. We can with bold confidence take the wealth of his love, his compassion, his goodness, his righteousness, out into the world and let it multiply. That is indeed how talents and treasure change lives. To not live into this parable as a faith lesson leads to 'weeping and gnashing of teeth,' which despite the damnation we hear, is actually a Jewish idiomⁱⁱ about anger, not punishment, not the wrath of God. In our own time we would say 'blew a gasket' or 'mad as a hornet.' In not living into his faith, in hiding his Master-given, God-given talent, the third servant has chosen to not enter into the joy of what was shared with him. He hid what was to be shared and created his own darkness.

When we understand the parable as the way we live every day in faith, we are just as conscious of our stewardship in May and July as we are in November. We understand that stewardship has a major financial component for the funding and the business and the support and care of our ministries, our buildings that are the home base for so many ways we live out our faith lives together. It funds people and projects and possibilities. It is by faith that our contributions offer an open door for the senior exercise group and the prayer shawl ministry and AA and Family Promise to gather warm and welcomed. It is by faith that our contributions offer a place for our youth groups to gather, a place of belonging and comfort and home, that their parents may or may not yet feel themselves. It is by faith that our contributions offer immediate disaster support in the community or on the other side of the world. It is by faith that our contributions bring us together for regular worship and fellowship, prayer and song so that we can then renewed and refreshed to go back out into the world as stewards of God's good creation and living into our baptismal promises. It is by faith that our contributions and working together can lead us to be open to new ideas and traditions.

One of Jesus' last lessons then is that we take the treasure of faith, the wealth of his love, his compassion, his goodness, his righteousness into the world to let it multiply as good stewards.

It would be only about 20 years later that Paul wrote his first pastoral letter, the first letter to the Thessalonians, reminding them to continue to encourage one another and build each other up. This is the life of faith together, of sharing in the talent that brings us into the Master's joy. Encouraging and building one another up changes lives through talent and treasure. This is our faith investment, to be a community of real connection with our fellow human beings, with all of God's creation and to bury deep into the ground addiction, greed and hate. Amen.

ⁱ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200419f/casey_baggott_making_it_matter

ⁱⁱ <https://www.uncommonministries.org/post/weeping-and-gnashing-of-teeth>