

“Use Your Gifts”
November 19th, 2017
Text: Matthew 25:14-30

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

"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.'

The Olivet Discourse

This passage is late in Matthew's gospel. It is now the week in which Jesus will be arrested and crucified. Jesus is on the Mount of Olives and he is talking privately with his disciples. This section of Matthew is known as the *Olivet Discourse*, and contains passages of Jesus describing, like always, the kingdom of heaven and specifically what it will be like in the end; the end times; the *eschaton*. Jesus is cautioning about staying alert and prepared, he is describing the signs that will occur in the end, and he is warning of consequences for those who will be caught unawares.

This *Parable of the Talents* communicates his message in terms of money, a message that can be easily grasped by his hearers. In the context of the Scripture a talent is a sizable amount of money. So, the master is taking a risk by leaving all this money with his slaves. To some he gives more, to some he gives less, depending on their ability. But he entrusts them with his resources, and then he goes away. And then, as we know from the story, he returns.

Now, of course Jesus is getting at something more profound. There is an intent behind this parable, just like in all the other parables Jesus tells. In this one there is something to hear about our very existence and what we do with what God has given us, and how, for sure, we will one day give an accounting of what we did with it.

Two Industrious Slaves

What if I were to tell you we have been given treasure?—some very valuable treasure. What do we do with that treasure? Are we trustworthy? Trustworthiness is rewarded in this passage.

In this story we have two examples of an energized and bold handling of what has been entrusted; the first slave who turns five talents into ten, and the second who turns two into four. They trade, they interact somehow with others, and they double their amounts. And both hear the words,

"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."

How do we handle the treasure we have been given? How can we be like the first two servants and use what God is entrusting us with to turn it into more?

The Third Slave

But not everyone in this story is as industrious as the first two slaves. Results, as they say, may vary. Fearing he would somehow he would lose what the master had given to him, the third slave grabs a shovel, digs a hole and buries the talent that was given to him. No trading, no interaction with others, no doubling of his amount. Then for him there is nothing to forward to except that place where no one wants to go; a place Jesus mentions more than once: the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. He thought he was doing the right thing. He was being safe and responsible with the money. He was not going to lose it, no one was going to steal it, he put it in a secured place and he was able to return it its rightful

owner when he returned. But sadly, he had the wrong idea of things from the start. He had the wrong idea of the master.

Our Image of God

Everyone has an image of God. And no two images of God are going to be alike. If I were to ask each of you how you experience God, there would be as many different responses as there are people in this room. Our image of God is formed in many ways. Our reading of Scripture is one way. Our church traditions inform us about who God is. Our own personal experiences tell us something about God. And our ability to reason also shapes who God is in our mind. // We have all been through a lot with God through our years, and our image of God has surely shifted quite a few times based on many factors. How do you experience God? Who is the God you know?

“Master,” says the third slave, “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.”

Fear. It can cripple us. For the third slave his fear of the master leads to his own wickedness and laziness. And now his greatest fear has come true. The talent is taken away from him and given to another. At one time he held great treasure in his hands, but out of fear he buried it. Now all is lost.

Entering Into God’s Joy

God gives gifts to everyone. We are given abilities and resources. We are each of us gifted in unique ways, each contributing to this life in ways that only we can. But hear the clear message in today’s passage: there are expectations and responsibilities when it comes to these gifts. Imagine and anticipate the moment of reckoning when all will be measured; when we hope to hear the words, “Well done, trustworthy servant!”

But what if I were to tell you beside these gifts we have been given treasure—very valuable treasure. When the Holy Spirit enters your life and gets inside your heart and you come to faith in Jesus and know that if you have seen the Son you have seen the Father, that if you know Jesus, you know God, you have your hands on the treasure that humanity has been looking for from the beginning. The good news is the kingdom of heaven has come near, and now God is entrusting us with it. This treasure cannot be buried. It does no good in the ground. Use it or lose it. To enter into God’s joy our task must be to expand the kingdom of heaven.

Making Good Use of Our Time

But life can be short. Psalm 90 reminds us: *“Our years come to an end like a sigh. The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. So teach us God, to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.”*

We must make good use of our time. Thank God we have the Holy Spirit operating in our lives so we can go out and fearlessly make the most of God’s gifts.

We can have what is called a bold witness. I see many of you operating in your gifts, keep on! Good work is being done in our Food Pantry, and lives are being transformed because of it. Some of you are working with Caregiver Volunteers of Central Jersey and the enemy called loneliness is being defeated. There is work being done by members in this church with Yamba Uganda, an organization that is helping communities become stronger and healthier in that African country. I see all kinds of improvements happening in our facilities both inside and out. I see us reaching the community. The House Tour is coming up soon and I see many hard working people getting ready to stretch out welcoming arms to an entire community.

And I know sometimes we all need encouragement. We all need reminders now and again to dig up our talents, shake off the dirt and put them to use. The holidays have arrived and we will be spending a lot of time with family and friends and with each other. This is the time we have to work toward the expansion of the kingdom of heaven. Be the first or second servant and double what has been given to you.

And thank God we have good examples like Bob Eaglesham to look to. His active participation in the kingdom of heaven as demonstrated by his service here in this life is an inspiration. This is why his family honors him today with the dedication of the refurbished steeple. God gave him a sharp mind, a generous heart, and a vibrant soul, and all of them he used well. He was trustworthy and gets to hear the words, "*Well done!*" and "*Enter into the joy of your Master.*" May it be the same for all of us. Amen!