

St. Mary's Episcopal Church
Message by Rev. Michael Burke

November 17, 2023
Matthew 25:14-30



Let's look at the Gospel for today, Matthew's telling of the story of the buried talents.

Carol Works, a biblical scholar, calls this "one of the most abused passages of scripture."¹

To begin with, it is not an allegory. "The master's willingness to earn money at the expense of others challenges any allegorical interpretation of the parable that would directly correlate him with [God or] Jesus, who never acts in a manner to seek personal gain. [The landowner] is a man who reaps where he does not sow and gathers where he has not scattered seed. He aggressively seeks to expand his estate and takes whatever he can wherever he can to make a profit. He even reprimands the servant for failing

¹ Bible scholar and professor Carla Works. See: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33/commentary-on-matthew-2514-30-7>

to invest the money with the bankers so that he might have gained interest — a practice forbidden in scripture (Exodus 22:25; Leviticus 25:35-38).”²

That a wealthy landowner would behave in this manner, however, makes the story all the more compelling.

In the Gospel context, Jesus tells this parable to his disciples to prepare them for the time ahead, when it will seem that the world will be against them and his coming again seems long delayed. It speaks of the need to remain faithful, even when the wait is long.

So what is “faithfulness” in Matthew’s Gospel? For Matthew, it is emulating the ministry of Jesus. Announcing God’s presence, God’s reign amongst us, by lifting up those who are downhearted, feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, and serving the most vulnerable.

This is the work, Matthew says, that the master has called us to.

It is the work that this community of St. Mary’s does, in the ministries we share together: creating space for twelve step recovery groups, rehousing those who are house-less; feeding families with food insecurity through our partnership with FISH, which delivers 130,000 meals a year to our neighbors in need.

But it is also things we do outside of the collective efforts we share in. It is Karol bringing food to her neighbor when she is recovering from a medical procedure; it is Braydon baking loaves of bread; it is...

But I am going to invite us to step back, not one but two steps from this Gospel and look at it again. It is liberally dripping with tones of judgement, something we almost always see with the way Matthew retells the parables of Jesus.

Have you ever noticed, however, that both of the faithful” servants come before the master and are told, “Well done, enter into the joy of your master.” Joy!

There is an old adage that preachers often preach first to themselves, and preach the kind of sermons that they themselves need to hear.

I wonder (that’s all, I don’t “know,;” I just wonder...) if Matthew struggled to experience that sense of joy. The impression one gets in reading the Gospel of Matthew is that his image of God is an image of God who is not easily satisfied and whose angry judgement is always near. No matter the good news, in Matthew’s Gospel “weeping and gnashing of teeth” and lakes of unquenchable fire are always waiting for some just down the road. Granted, God is always merciful to those who show mercy, but judgement is

² Ibid.

shown on those who either abuse their wealth and privilege or who are indifferent to the needs of the most vulnerable around them.

I do not know, but I wonder, if Matthew's retelling of the parables of Jesus reveal as much or more about Matthew than they do about Jesus.

Remember, the period in which the writer of the Gospel according to Matthew is bringing together his Gospel in essentially final form, is right in the midst of cataclysmic events in their world. In the year 70, in the middle of the period where this particular Gospel was coming together, the Roman legions besieged and then destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple. The Jewish historian Josephus, who was present during the siege of Jerusalem, wrote that 1.1 million Jews were killed³ and 97,000 were enslaved.⁴

If Matthew ends every retelling with a sense of impending doom, that was his lived experience. All the big stories all around him ended with wailing and destruction. Those were the times in which he and his community lived and struggled to survive.

I find it telling that in this Gospel, the "wicked and lazy" servant has really been neither wicked nor lazy, but simply *fearful*. He was pretty much convinced that bad things were going to happen, so he played it safe, or so he thought. He was paralyzed by his own self-judgement and apprehension. He sought to escape the responsibility the master had given him for this wealth by getting it out of his hands and into the ground. He dug a hole and hid his talents in the ground, so he could give them back when the master returned. Only that turned out to be the wrong approach. I feel for that poor guy. And I have some sympathy for Matthew as well. And, I suspect, for myself.

So here is what I take away from all this, for what it is worth:

Discipleship does not promise a safe harbor. On the contrary, true disciples are called to take risks, weigh anchor, venture beyond the known and secure. Let's risk a little. Let's not just play it safe.

Our world increasingly has echoes of Matthew's world. It is hard to know what to do in the face of the unspeakable horrors in Gaza and Israel over the past six weeks and right now. Its hard to know what to do about the crisis at the US southern border, and people in refugee camps around the world. People in Eastern Ukraine live in constant fear of their safety and their lives. A shocking number of people have died outdoors and unsheltered here in Anchorage. Young Native women "turn up missing" all the time, and the system hardly notices. It is hard to know how to respond.

I have been in conversation over the past week with several dear friends, who report they feel paralyzed with a sense of powerless in the face of it all. They feel a moral responsibility to be present and to be

³ Goldberg, G.J. "[Chronology of the War According to Josephus: Part 7, The Fall of Jerusalem](http://www.josephus.org)", at www.josephus.org. Retrieved November 17, 2023.

⁴ Josephus, [The Wars of the Jews VI.9.3](#)

aware, and yet how many repetitions of the 24-hour news cycle can one human heart, soul, and mind bear? How many times can you witness the effects of war on children, families, and the elders? These are just everyday people, trying to live their lives, and who daily have to traverse a landscape of horrors.

It is *real powerlessness, that we feel.* It is. Neither you nor I control the armies and policy centers of the world. But real powerlessness doesn't kill the soul. Surplus powerlessness does. What is surplus powerlessness?⁵ Surplus powerlessness is what happens when the story we tell ourselves renders us more powerless than we actually are. When we say to ourselves, "Because I cannot change *this*, there is no point in really trying to change anything." And we retreat to our own private comfort and concerns about our personal safety and security. Not because we are bad people, but because it a human response to instability or incapacity. In other words, when we are more afraid than we need to be, we hide our gift of talents in the ground. It is completely understandable, but it *is* a fear response.

Instead, I feel called to do this: I *strive* to do this: For every shattering news story or headline, I will seek to respond. Not in kind, but in kindness. With each news item of a new attack or barrage of missiles, I will seek and find something to do in *my small corner of the world* that makes a difference.

I will make two sandwiches tomorrow morning, and I will pull over on the way to work and offer one to the guy slumped over on the bus stop bench. I will bring a fresh cup of coffee to my neighborhood school administrator. I will call my public official and thank them for their best efforts. I will shovel the walk for my elderly neighbor. I will begin and end each day with a time of prayer for those who are in harm's way in the world. I will bring a whole damn case of peanut butter over to FISH, and it will make a difference. I will seek out and delight in beauty where I can find it. I will hug my children for an extra minute today. I will sing out loud, especially if I never do so. I will call my sister who I have not talked to in weeks. I will forgive my brother. I will write a thank you note to someone who is not expecting it. I will dance in my kitchen. I will call someone who lives alone, and just listen to them tell me about their week. I will encourage and build others up.

Some will become politically active. Some will join with others in search of solutions. Some may start a movement. There is no single way to be faithful.

This is faith in action. These things matter. *Small* things matter.

I will not allow myself to feel more powerless than I am. I will act.

I will unearth my talents, brush them off, and set them to work, by the power of almighty God, working in me, and in us all. Amen.

⁵ Michael Lerner, *Surplus Powerlessness*, Humanity Press, 1991. ISBN 9780391037069.

<https://www.powells.com/book/surplus-powerlessness-the-psychodynamics-of-everyday-life-9780391037069>

CODA, for those reading the printed version:

God has never been one to play it safe. A God not interested in taking risks would never have created the human race in the first place.

But God not only risked creation. **God risked relationship** -- first with Noah, again with Abraham, eternally with David and the people of Israel. Finally, God even risked the divine self -- taking human form in the incarnation and suffering a painful and humiliating death, only to rise again in the miracle of the resurrection.

If God risked everything in the person of Jesus Christ for the sake of our salvation, to enter deeply into the human experience of joy, pain and redemption, doesn't it seem likely that this same God might expect more than self-seeking, self-motivated, safety-conscious behavior from us?

The risk called for in today's lesson is the willingness to open our lives to a power beyond our own. It is the holy risk of:

- having faith in yourself, of
- having faith in God's ability to work through your life, of
- having faith in the transformative power of forgiveness, and of Love itself.

The risks God would have us take are for the sake of others. Risking ourselves, not just our money or our status -- that is the genuine risk of discipleship.

Other people should be the focus of our risk-taking. Relationships are the riskiest business around. Risking to love and serve, risking rejection and ridicule, risking despair for the promise of fulfillment -- those are the truly profound risks that God wants us all to take.

Perhaps the primary reason the servant hid his "talents" in the ground, was out of fear. Fear he would lose them, fear he would fail, fear tragedy would befall him and he would be left with nothing at all.

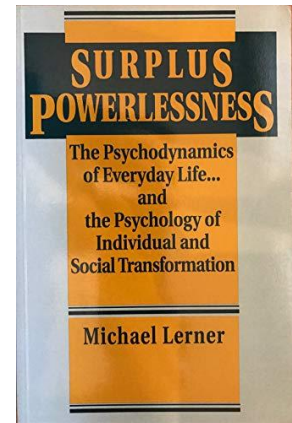
It is a metaphor for our lives when we never take the risk, never take the chance to dance, never embrace the risk in being open to creativity, to God's work in us, to risk to be wounded and then to be made well. We never risk of our own little "deaths" and we thereby miss the reality of God's power of resurrection."¹

In his book *If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get Out of the Boat*, John Ortberg says he believes our courage or lack of courage is directly related to the size of our God. If we live with a small God, then we live in a constant state of fear and anxiety because everything depends on us. We cannot be generous because our financial security depends on us. We cannot take risks because our safety depends on us.

"So how do we enlarge our sense of God? And how do we find the wisdom and the courage to step

out in faith? We do it by spending time in worship and in faith community — places where we are reminded about the grand story of God through time — the story of which we are a part. Places where we are reminded about God’s steadfast love for God’s people. Places where we hear stories of how God is working in the lives of others we know. We must be reminded of the ways God has acted in the past if we are to have courage and wisdom to step out in the future.⁶”

May God spin your life around and point it towards Joy. Amen.



Scriptures Appointed for Today:

The Epistle- 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.

The Gospel - Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, “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

⁶ Jennifer Heinz, “Stepping out in Faith,” *Brookhaven Christian Church Web Site*, November 4, 2007. brookhavenchristian.org.

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.'"

Songfile:

Eye Of the Storm

When it's dark outside you've got to carry a light
 Or you'll stumble and fall like tumbling dice
 It takes a steady step, it takes God-given sight
 Just to tell what is the truth,
 what is wrong, what is right

In this world
 Thunder throbs in the darkness
 Out in the eye of the storm
 The friends of God suffer no permanent harm

When the night sky glows with the red fires of war
 And the threat of annihilation pounds at your door
 You don't have to pretend

that you got nerves of steel
 To believe that the love of the Lord is actual and real

In this world
 Thunder throbs in the darkness
 Out in the eye of the storm
 The friends of God suffer no permanent harm

When the daybreak comes with a trumpet blast
 And the true fruit of faith is tasted at long-last
 When the darkness dies and death is undone
 And teardrops are dried in the noonday sun

In this world
 Thunder throbs in the darkness
 Out in the eye of the storm
 The friends of God suffer no permanent harm

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