

The parable we've just listened to is the second of three parables in the 25th chapter of Matthew. Last week we read the parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, today the parable of the talents, and next week we'll read the parable of the Last Judgment. Matthew has grouped these parables because they all presuppose the departure of Jesus and his anticipated return. When would it happen? What would it be like? What shall we be doing while we wait? The parables discourage us from speculating on the when and how of Jesus' return and instead direct our attention to the present, to the question "What shall we be doing while we wait?"

In the parable of the talents, Jesus tells us that what we should be doing while we wait is be faithful stewards of all our resources. Because a talent in Jesus' day was an amount of silver, there is a tendency to think the parable tells us that the essence of stewardship is about our finances, but stewardship is much more than that. This can begin to be seen when we understand what a talent was.

Three slaves are given gifts by their master -- ten talents, five talents, and one talent. We might imagine this to be like ten dollars, five dollars, and one dollar, or a thousand dollars, five hundred dollars, and a hundred dollars. Actually a talent was somewhere between 75 and 96 pounds of silver. At the basic daily wage of one denarius a day, it would take nearly twenty years for an average person to earn a talent of silver. So the first thing to note is that the master in Jesus' parable is incredibly generous to all his slaves – even the one who was entrusted with only one talent was getting like a million dollars!

A second thing to note in the parable is that the slaves were expected to do something with these gifts. The first two slaves took that calling seriously, but the third is kind of a puzzle. He is not dishonest or evil. He doesn't spend the money on himself or lose it. He prudently digs a hole and hides it – which in the days before banks was considered a sensible thing to do. By preserving exactly what had been entrusted to him, he can at least minimally stay in the good graces of his master—or so he thinks. Though his master has expressed confidence in him and given him an extravagant gift to use, he assumes that his master is a harsh man. Whereas the first two slaves see their master as the giver of good gifts, the third slave sees his master only as a harsh dictator. The first two slaves in turn seem grateful for what they have been given, while the third rationalizes his inactivity by blaming the master. "I was afraid of you," he says. "That's why I didn't do anything with your gift." "I was afraid of you" is just another way of saying "I don't trust you."

A third thing to note in the parable is a stress on rewards and punishment. The two servants who invested wisely are rewarded for their achievement, and the timid one who stashed his money away is sharply rebuked and the money taken away. How does that square with the image of God Jesus gives us in the parable of the prodigal son, who squanders everything the father gave him but is still welcome back and forgiven? This slave doesn't squander or lose the money, he just doesn't do anything with it, and yet he gets a stern tongue-lashing.

While we ponder that, there are a couple of details to note in the parable. First, the two faithful servants who were given ten and five talents don't receive higher salaries or gold watches or plaques to put on their walls. What do they get? First, they get more responsibility. "You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things" says the master. It seems the reward for taking the risk and managing the investment is the burden of greater risk and the challenge of greater investments. But with that responsibility comes a second reward: the joy of the master's presence. What is the punishment of the third servant? He loses the same two things: he loses the responsibility of being a steward and he loses the joy of the master's presence.

The parable clarifies the alternatives. To the one choosing security over risk, the Lord remains a hard master. He does not experience the joy and the freedom of response the Lord intends for him. But those who are willing to risk, those who are willing to trust, discover a Lord ready to share the delight of his presence and participation in his mission. They discover a link with Jesus, the teller of the story, who knew all about risks and who himself is a prodigal lover, giving his unconditional love to all.

I suggested earlier that this parable is not exclusively about financial stewardship, and that's true. Jesus is telling us that what we should be doing each day as we await his return is to be faithful stewards of all the gifts with which God has blessed us. We are to put to good use our time and talents, for though we may be gifted in different ways, we are each gifted in some way and we are to be faithful stewards of those gifts – not burying them or putting them on a shelf and forgetting about them. To not use a gift is an insult to the one who gave the gift, and to not use the gifts God has given us is an insult to God.

Though the parable is not exclusively about financial stewardship, our finances are an important part of stewardship. Some people say that life is like two lanes of traffic, one material and the other spiritual. "Money is important in the material lane but not in the spiritual lane," they seem to say. "To connect with God you move to the spiritual lane – you pray. To be in touch with the real world, you move to the material lane – you run in the rat race, trying to make a buck."

Jesus did not divide reality into two parts like this. He said that the way we think and behave with regard to money impacts us both physically and spiritually. Its use and misuse affect our relationship with God and the quality of our life. That's why Jesus said, "For where you treasure is, there your heart will be also."

People extend their personalities in several ways – how they spend their time, the people with whom they choose to

associate, how they rear their children. But one of the most powerful means by which we extend our personhood is through the ways we use money. Through money, we choose the kind of car we drive, the house we purchase, which social ladder we climb, our hobbies.

Jesus does not disapprove of wealth or see money to be evil. If he had, he would not have accepted the hospitality and friendship of wealthy people. But Jesus warns that money is a potentially dangerous way to extend our personality. By itself, money is a neutral force. Like electricity, it can light a church or a terrorist hideout. So when Jesus says, “where you treasure is, there your heart will be also”, it is both a warning and a promise. It is a warning because Jesus knows that money can take the place of God in our life and separate us from God. It is a promise because money can strengthen our relationship with God and the quality of our life.

When we talk about stewardship at St. Barnabas, we don’t begin by projecting what our budget will be next year and then figure out what each person’s “share” is. That’s because we don’t give to a budget – we give from our blessings. That’s where we discover the joy of giving. That’s where we enter the joy of the master’s presence.

I was walking through a store in Ridgedale a couple of weeks ago when I came across this cup with the word “grateful” printed on it. It occurred to me that this is a great metaphor for the joy of giving. When we sit down at a table to eat, in front of us there is a place setting — a plate or bowl, some utensils, a cup or glass, and a napkin. These place settings come in many varieties. They may be disposable paper & plastic; “everyday” stoneware and stainless flatware; or fine china with sterling silverware. But regardless of the simplicity or the beauty of the dishes and utensils, there is one item that is always appropriate at every place setting — a “cup of grateful.” We are grateful to God not only for the food on the plates, but for all the goodness of God we experience on a daily basis. When we (both as individuals and as a congregation) include a “cup of grateful” at our place settings, we respond to God’s blessings with generous offerings, which through our staff and the ELCA get transformed into Christian ministry.



A Cup of Grateful

There are two couples that are friends of mine who are among the most generous people I know and also among the most joy-filled people I know. I have discovered that there’s a connection between those two attributes: generosity and being joy-filled. Each couple has a similar practice – they have two checking accounts, and when they deposit their paychecks, they put 10% into one account and it is out of that account that they make their gifts to the church and their other charitable giving. One of the couples actually has named this account the “Joy Account” and they have had to set up a system where they take turns from month to month writing the checks out of that account because they truly experience a sense of joy writing those checks and they both want the opportunity to sense that joy.

In the prayer we pray after giving our offering, we say “Merciful God, we offer with joy and thanksgiving...” Is that true to your experience? Does your giving bring you joy? I hope so. My hope is that each of us might know the joy of the master’s presence.

This is the time of year we set our giving goals for the coming year. You have likely already thought about your giving goal and filled out the pledge card. What are the criteria that you have used to set that goal? What I gave last year? What seems reasonable? What I have left over after I pay for everything else?

I suggest to you that the best criterion for setting your giving goal is to determine what level of giving will give you joy. At what level will you sense, “Yes, this is a gift that truly represents the gratitude I feel for all the blessings I know in my life. This is a gift that indicates that my life is in proper balance, that my heart and my treasure are in the same place. This is a gift that I am excited to give.”

If you haven’t thought about what level of giving will give you joy, hang on to your pledge card for another week. You don’t have to place it in the offering plate today. Have that conversation with yourself, and if you’re married, talk it over with your spouse. Let your response include a “cup of grateful” and you will find what generations of Christians have found to be true – that it is not joyful people who are generous, but it is the other way around – that generosity results in joy.