

## **A Hidden Opportunity - Sermon – November 15, 2020**

The Gospel reading for today is a famous parable, but it is also a difficult one to figure out in terms of its meaning. In earlier English translations this was known as the Parable of the Talents, because that was the measurement used to describe the amount given by the master to his servants. The Common English Bible translates the amount as “a valuable coin”. But that can be misleading if we look at what a ‘talent’ was as a measurement in the ancient Near East.

In ancient Greece a talent was a unit of weight of approximately 80 pounds, and when used for money it was valued for that weight in silver. As a unit of currency a talent was worth about 6000 denarii, a denarius being the usual payment for a day’s labour. Thus a single talent was worth 16 years of labor – in other words a lavish amount of money.

This is what I want us to consider this morning, the incredible action of the master entrusting huge amounts of money to his servants. One Bible scholar put the value of a single talent at one and a half million dollars in today’s money. Thus when the Common English Bible states that these were valuable coins that is an understatement.

Consider what the first part of this parable is telling us – if we recognize the master in the parable as God, and the servants as us, then what this parable is telling us is how abundantly God gifts us with the resources we need to make a difference. Imagine what you could do with a million and a half dollars! Or three million! Or over seven million dollars! That’s the amounts being mentioned in this parable, amounts that represent a real opportunity to make a difference.

I imagine Jesus’ audience was stunned by the opening of this story, they would have had a hard time even imagining such a huge amount of money – and then to consider that servants were entrusted with such large amounts – that must have been unthinkable to them... and yet that’s what Jesus tells them.

If God is the master in this story, and we are the servants consider what that is saying about God, and about us. First it tells us that God entrusts his people with his valuable work, and gives us abundant resources to carry out that work. It tells us of God’s incredible generosity – gifting us with more than enough resources to carry out the mission of God. This parable also suggests that we are gifted by God with valuable abilities and opportunities. We are seen as up to the challenge, we have what it takes to do God’s work. If you ever feel you are unworthy, or unable, to do God’s work, this parable tells you otherwise. God has presented you with an opportunity to further God’s kingdom, and God has entrusted you with this amazing responsibility.

The first two servants in the parable take the resources given them by the master and put them to work. Through putting these gifts, these talents, these resources into use the amount was doubled. Not immediately however, this didn't happen overnight – the parable says “after a long time”. Perhaps the first two servants didn't see much return for their efforts initially – but they stuck with it, they kept at it, and eventually they were able to double what their master had entrusted them with.

So I think there is a message about patience and endurance in this parable too. In an age of instant gratification we are not well trained for patience and endurance – all throughout the New Testament letters the early Christians were encouraged to be patient and to endure the hardships they faced – patience and endurance was part of a life of faith for Christians.

Now we turn our attention to the third servant, while he was not given the same amount as the first two servants it was still a substantial amount. But rather than put that resource to good use, he buried it where it could do nothing. He didn't even put it in the bank so it could collect some interest – it literally was a wasted opportunity. He hid the talent given him, burying the possibilities of doing something good. While it is true nothing “bad” happened to what was entrusted to him, it also wasn't used the way it was intended. In other words the servant either didn't know, or didn't care about what the master wanted done with this resource.

To make matters worse, this third servant was motivated by some questionable assumptions. When called to account for what he had done with the resources entrusted to him the servant begins his excuse with the statement “I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven't sown. You gather crops where you haven't spread seed.” Let's consider those statements in the light of the overwhelming generosity the master shows in the beginning of the parable. When the master's possessions were handed over to the servants there were no difficult expectations set forth, no warnings about the consequences of failure, nothing at all to indicate that this was a harsh master.

The more I thought about it, the more I came to see the third servant as projecting his own faults onto the master. In essence he was seeking to blame others for his behaviour rather than taking personal responsibility. This reminded me of the scene in the Garden of Eden when Adam blames Eve for his disobedience, and then Eve blames the serpent which is really blaming God who created the serpent in the first place.

Was the third servant fearful, or was he just lazy? He doesn't seem to really know what the master is like. If the master was one to be feared why didn't the two who were entrusted with larger amounts behave in a fearful manner as well? I don't think the reason the third servant hid the money in a hole in the ground was really because of his fear – the master shoots that excuse down, the least and safest thing he could have done is deposit the money in a bank to collect interest. The more I think about this, the more I have come to see the behaviour of the third servant to be based purely in self-centeredness. He doesn't see the incredible opportunity he's been given because he is only looking at the world through his own self-centered perspective. Perhaps the real reason is because the servant couldn't see the point of working with the resources entrusted to him only to benefit the master eventually. If it wasn't going to benefit him directly, then why put any effort into this at all? In other words, this servant didn't really care about what the master wanted - this servant didn't really care about the master.

Consider again the first two servants – even though they knew their hard work would ultimately end up benefitting the master, they didn't show resentment or fear, they simply got to work doing what they could to carry on the master's mission with the master's resources. And in the end they didn't lose out, in the end they were welcomed into a closer relationship with the master – invited to celebrate, and were subsequently put in charge of much more. It's like they were made partners in the firm. No longer simply servants, they were managers, part of the team, treated like family.

This is the sad part of the story, the third servant by his attitude and actions (or lack of actions more accurately) removed himself from the master's mission, distanced himself from the master's work, and in doing so consigned himself to a place outside the celebration. At that point there would indeed be weeping and regret, or maybe just wallowing in self-pity which is it's own kind of misery.

If we focus on the end of the parable this becomes a story of warning. But I think that taken as a whole the story really is talking about the natural consequences of our choices. If we choose to use what God has given us to engage in the work God has called us to do we are participating in the mission of God and we can be assured of God's commendation "Well done! You are a good and faithful servant."

If on the other hand we choose to ignore or misuse the gifts God has given us, then we will turn in on ourselves, and distance ourselves from the very one who has given us life – life with meaning and purpose.

I think there is also a message of encouragement in this parable, we are told that if we simply try, if we use what God has entrusted us with, those efforts will be blessed and we will increase the Kingdom of God.

Now you might be thinking “But I’m not talented, God hasn’t given me any special gifts.” But you would be wrong, for I am convinced that everyone has been given abilities and opportunities to participate in God’s mission in the world. My guess is that you’ve already been doing this work all along, and you just didn’t know it.

Next Sunday, in the concluding verses of Matthew Chapter 25 you will encounter people who were engaged in God’s mission without even knowing it – they were simply doing what they were inspired to do as followers of Jesus. They didn’t know they were serving Christ by helping others, but Christ knew and he invites them to join the celebration.

Right now, this very day, and in the days and weeks to come, there will be many opportunities to engage in the mission of the master, to do God’s work. Perhaps these opportunities are hidden to you at the moment, but if you are open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, if you simply seek to do God’s will each and every day these opportunities will become apparent, if not immediately, then upon reflection.

Know that God has blessed you richly with resources, both within yourself and all around you. These resources are not to be hidden, nor are they to be used for personal gain, but rather they are resources that enable us to share in the work of God, for the purpose of bringing God’s kingdom into its fullness. We pray “your kingdom come, your will be done” using the words Jesus taught us. As Martin Luther explains regarding those petitions “God’s good and gracious will comes about without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come about in and among us.”

So do the work of peacemaking, do the work of caring for your neighbours, do the work of encouraging the downhearted, do the work of showing compassion to all, do the work of caring for creation – and trust that God has given you the necessary resources to do this work in the name of Jesus. The ability to shine of the light of Christ in this world filled with darkness is there, it just needs to be uncovered.