

Twenty-seventh Sunday After Pentecost St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA
Matthew 25:14-30 November 16, 2008
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

Resource(s) for Life

The Gospel lesson today is referred to as the Parable of the Talents. What is a 'talent'? In biblical times talent referred to a measure of weight like an ounce or kilo or a ton. A talent was thought to be the amount of weight that a full grown man could comfortably carry on his back. Over time the word 'talent' became known as a certain sum of money. Two thousand years ago, a talent was the equivalent of what a person could earn in fifteen years. A talent was a lot of money; perhaps literally a ton of money. In our language today, talent has come to mean a skill, or an ability. It actually derives from this very parable. If someone has a gift, or an ability that has worldly value – like the ability to create art, or to make music, or to sell specific products – we call that ability a 'talent'. Talents in the first century and today, are meant to be used, not buried.

In Jesus' day, burying things of value was an accepted way of safeguarding them. According to Jewish law, if you buried your treasure, you were no longer responsible for it. It was certainly safe and secure; it accomplishes nothing. This is the meaning of this parable. To bury the gifts that the master has entrusted to you, is inappropriate. Burying a talent is like building a ship and never sailing it out of port; the ship is safe, but it is useless. When we try to keep things as they are without using our talents we are like burying our talents and ourselves. We keep out of sight and let the world go on without us.

To risk your gifts or talents to apply them to the busy-ness of this world, is to make productive use of your talents. In this parable, Jesus says one day the master will return and demand an accounting of how they used their given talents. How can we interpret this meaning today in a complex world, where things are not as simple as a master going on a journey and leaving us briefly in charge with his things? Or the boss going on vacation leaving you in charge of the operation; or the pastor leaving the vicar in charge!

Let's consider this parable as a story of trust. Trust that we will use what we have been given to better the world around us. When I was

managing the catering company, the owner entrusted me with his business. He told me I could operate the company as though it was my own, using his financial resources along with his experience. He had trusted me with his business. Within three years, the business more than doubled in size. Using my own knowledge and with the help of others together we were able to do more than was thought possible.

In this parable the master entrusts his resources to his servants. He gives to each of them a portion of himself. He gives them no instructions, trusting them to use their talents wisely. Each is given a different amount. After a long period of time, the master returns and calls in his three servants. Two have doubled their resources, one buried his resource afraid of his master. He did not trust his master – he reduced his risk of investment to zero. Yet he also reduced his possibility of success to zero too.

What do you suppose the master would have done if the first two servants had not returned a profit? Or what if they had risked their resources and lost it all returning empty-handed? I think the master would have accepted them. After all, in the parable what he commends is not their profits, but their faithfulness. The two servants who returned with double their resources were not praised for the size of their growth, instead, the master responds, “well done, good and trustworthy servant.” Each receives the same invitation, “You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” I suspect that even if the third servant had made a minimum of effort motivated by faith the master would have offered the same invitation. Instead, he was afraid; fearful of the master.

God gives to each of us many talents, resources for life; things to help us live in love with ourselves and each other. Each of us does not receive the same gifts. God entrusts us with what we can use. God gives us varying degrees of resources to use. God gives them to us with no specific instructions. To use our gifts for others. Some people have many talents, others have a few, and some have only one. But everybody has been gifted by God with some ability, or skill, or talent. What does this parable say to us? One day, God is going to ask for an accounting of how we used our talent in this world. “I gave you the gift of music; did you develop it and use it? I gave you the gift of caring for children; did you care for any? I gave you the ability to lead people; did you lead any? The question will be not

how much did you gain from it, but did you take a risk and develop the gift for others to know.

The two servants recognize generosity when they see it. The talents they receive reveal a master who is pretty generous, who takes a risk, who accepts them, even honors them. Finding themselves at the receiving end of this outrageous trust, they feel empowered and willing to take risks of their own. The love their master shows them overcomes their fear of failure. They realize that any master who treats his servants in this open-handed way is more interested in them than in turning a profit.

This parable turns the standards of the world upside down. It announces that the worst thing that can happen to us is not failure. The worst thing that can happen is that we make God out to be a horrible old ogre who rejects us when we fail. The worst thing is not losing out; rather not taking a risk. We can learn from our failures, and often it is a failure that provides the most indelible lessons. Fear teaches us nothing – until we leave it behind. Fear causes us to remain in the same place, to not change, to remain as we are.

The gospel is crowded with people who are there to shock us into the recognition that it is stupid and ugly not to trust God. There's the snide elder brother who refuses to welcome home the prodigal son. The all-day workers who demand that late arrivals receive less than the daily wage. The Pharisee who tries to talk God into accepting him because he's kept the rules, not because God is merciful. All these people live in a gray, fearful world, where grace is absent.

What is the true, living and only God has not interest in keeping score? The Good News of Jesus gives new meaning to success and security. Success is found, not in accumulating more than we can ever use, but in our willingness to risk in response to God's invitation. Security is found, not in keeping pace with our rising paranoia, but in the utterly reliable God who trusts us before we trust ourselves, who risks, and asks that we risk also.

The Parable of the Talents is not really about money or abilities. It is a story about trust, a story about risk. Life is the same way. What's important is not money or abilities in themselves, but our decision to use them in ways that show our willingness to risk and to trust. The central

question about life is not “What did we accomplish?” but whether we learned to obey, whether we learned to love.

I would like to end with a story, that maybe you have heard. The telephone rings and a small boy answers it, but he answers it in a whisper. “hello.” “hello” the voice on the other end says, “Is your mommy there?” “Yes” the little boy answers. “Can I speak with her?” “Nope, she’s busy.” “okay, is your daddy there?” again the little boy answers, “yes.” “Okay, may I speak with him?” “Nope, he’s busy too.” By this time the caller is getting concerned. “Is there anyone else in the house?” This time the little boy answers, “There’s a fireman.” “A fireman,” the caller exclaims, “Can I speak to the fireman?” “Nope, he’s busy too.” “Well what are all these people busy doing?” “They’re looking for me!”

One day, God will come looking for you. You cannot hide like the little boy. You cannot avoid God. When God finds you, God will ask you what you did with all the gifts he entrusted to you. What will you say? “I buried them?” “I kept them hidden?” or “I used them to change my world.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.