

## Stewardship Sermon 2011

### *Before the gospel reading (Matthew 25:14-30)*

Today we hear again the familiar parable of the Talents.

Talent: the name for an amount of money worth 16 ½ years of labor, nearly a lifetime/career in Jesus' time. The rich man entrusted over a million dollars to the first slave (of five talents) and several hundred thousand to the other two.

The English word "talent" comes from this parable, not the other way round. When Jesus told it, he was not talking about a talent as personal skills or gifts such as carpentry, sewing, singing or throwing the discus. He was talking about money. Huge amounts of money. He was talking about an enormous amount of trust that a master might place in his people, and what those people might do or not do with that trust. So it is about money, and yet, as is always the case with Jesus, it is also about the human heart and what we treasure most. It is about the use of everything that God has given us. Our whole person, the totality of our being. This parable follows on the heels of last week's parable about the ten bridesmaids, five wise and five foolish. Keep in mind that the whole thing is about the kingdom of heaven, not personal investment strategy. Talk to your own financial professional for specific advice about your money.

### *After the reading:*

This parable always lands on Stewardship Sunday. Or, more accurately, we place Stewardship Sunday strategically on that Lord's Day when the gospel reading is this parable of the talents. This is no accident. That means that most of you have heard dozens of sermons on this text, and almost always with reference to this little piece of paper and the number that you will insert on the line. We know this as a pledge or a commitment of treasure in the alliterated trinity we talk about in the church as to what we owe God: Time, Talent and Treasure. We don't want to oversell the Treasure piece, because the Time and Talent are also important to run the organization we know as the church.

If everyone gave enormous sums of money so that we could hire everything done and not roll up our sleeves ourselves, this would be a very different church, and we might well question what kind of personal investment individuals really have in it. Our chili meal, for example, is not just about the money; one pledge could

more than cover our profit; it is also an important annual convergence of our time and talents. We could buy all the food and pay some caterer to come in and take care of everything and charge higher prices, but of course it wouldn't be the same. So take that parable of the talents and change the word "talent" to "chili."

Today our context includes receiving Shelley and Cindy into our church fellowship. They both have participated for a while, but today marks a new beginning for them and for the rest of us, as together we affirm our baptism. We make promises to one another about participation and mutual support. So take that parable of the talents and change the word "talent" to "discipleship." Today we celebrate the commitment of two new fellow travelers on the way, two more disciples who will help to shape the direction and character of this 171 year old institution we know as St Paul's Church. If the discipleship of these two new partners is wisely invested, and not buried, this creaky old institution will shake, rattle and roll with new life and become a little bit more the movement for the kingdom of God that I think Jesus intended. We all know that a healthy church family is made up of brothers and sisters who wisely invest and generously share their time, talent and treasure with one another. In the children's song "This Little Light of Mine" is the verse that asks the question "hide it under a bushel?" and the answer is an emphatic "no!"

Today we also dedicate these shoe boxes. Let me read a touching thank you note that was sent to Debbie Pichard from one of the recipients of the thirty boxes she made up last year. ----- When we do this annual Operation Christmas Child and our monthly food pantry collection, this giving represents an investment of time, talent and treasure, all of which could be more easily and comfortably buried. We could look the other way and just say No to the needs of the world around us. But to that No we shout an even louder NO! "Hide it under a bushel?" NO! No way!

In a few moments, we will receive the offering and your pledges of support for the ministry of St Paul's in the year to come. When the offering plates hit the altar, we are publically letting go of some treasure and saying to God: "We give thee but thine own. Whatever the gift may be. All that we have is thine alone a trust, O Lord, from thee."

When the offering plates hit the altar, we are admitting that burying talents isn't the best strategy. We are saying No to burying time, talent and treasure and saying Yes to throwing in our lot, our whole lot, with this missionary movement we call church. Of course some of our gifts will help pay off the solar panels which

are running our lights and the bills for the gas that fire our furnaces, and some will pay my salary and some will be sent to Madison and Cleveland and other places where we do things in the name of Jesus. But it all starts with investing and growth, rather than burying. It all starts with our perception of who God is.

I think that is the bottom line of the parable today. When the master says, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” he is rewarding behavior that mimics the master’s own. Only the burying slave sees his master as a hard man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not winnow. So the third slave does what is most prudent. He buries his one talent. He does the safe thing. He does the only thing that will ensure that the master gets back what he entrusted to the servant in the first place.

The other two servants took risks. The master wasn’t rewarding the doubling of investment. He was rewarding the attitude that allowed the first two servants to take a chance, to step off into the unknown, to use the gifts they were given and see what happens. Some commentators wonder what would have happened if one of the first two servants had gambled and lost their talents. I tend to think that the master would have said anyway, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master.”

If we perceive God as stingy. We will be stingy. If we perceive God as bountifully generous, we will be generous. If we see God as taking a risk in giving us good things, we will do the same. If we see God as being overly cautious and careful in burying good things in us, then we will do the same, paralyzed by anxiety. If we see the world as a pie with the only question being how to slice its pieces, we will hold on to our pie—fearfully, fiercely. But if we see the world as place of abundance, a bakery in which ovens remain hot and bakers get up in the middle of the night to make sure more fresh pies are available when the shop opens first thing in the morning... if we see God’s world as such a place of fresh, sweet-smelling abundance, we will live abundantly and want to share that abundance with others.

When Vicki and Eugene are done speaking this morning, some of you might want a new pledge card. Some of you might have mailed yours in already, and after today, you will want to add a zero to your pledge card. Our ushers will make those arrangements.

We are here not to bury talents, but to praise them. We are here not to bury time, talent or treasure in fear, but to share them with joy. We are here to risk all for the sake of the kingdom of God and the gospel of Jesus. We are here to share in a joyful spirit of grace what gives the very heart of God joy to share with us.

Listen for the words in your heart today, as we dedicate ourselves once again to God in this ministry: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master."