

Well Done, Good and Faithful Servant

Matthew 25:14-30

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A few weeks ago, we all learned that we have a sizable budget deficit, and we appointed a committee of wonderful leaders to come up with options for how we might close it. Raise revenue. Cut expenses. It sounds like a business problem, doesn't it? It is that, of course. But in a church, a deficit is also a theological issue, and so for this week and next we are going to think about what God has to tell us about how we approach this deficit. Where is God in this? Where are we in it as Christians? And so, this morning, we turn to the Parable of the Talents, which you have known probably all your life.

I heard a story once about a church that took this scripture very seriously. They had an all-church dinner to kick off their stewardship campaign. The pastor read this scripture to them, and then asked all the members to look under their plates. There they each found an envelope, and inside each envelope was a fifty-dollar bill. The pastor said, "We will meet here again after church in six weeks. Bring back what you have earned."

That threw the whole church into a tizzy. "Yikes! You mean we are actually supposed to do what the Bible says???" But then each member thought of what they could do to increase the \$50 they had received. One person bought some yarn and knitted a beautiful sweater and sold it. Another found a piece of furniture at a yard sale and refurbished it. Each person used their own skills to turn what they had been given into something more, to support

the ministries of the church. After six weeks, they came together again and pooled their profits. Sure enough, it was the largest fundraiser the church had ever held! What do you think? Are we really supposed to do what the Bible says?

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To understand this scripture, first you need to know what a talent is. According to the source of all information, Wikipedia, a talent is about thirty-three kilograms or about seventy-three pounds of gold. At the current exchange rate, a kilogram of gold is worth about fifty-eight thousand US dollars. So, a Biblical talent would be worth almost two million dollars today. We have to remember that large numbers in the Bible are not intended to be accurate. It's sort of like saying "a bazillion dollars." But for now, let's take this story at face value.

Jesus tells us, a super-rich man goes on a journey. Before he leaves, he calls his servants together and entrusts them with his wealth, each one according to his ability. To one he gives seven million dollars. To the second he gives three million dollars. To the third he gives one and a half million dollars. And he tells them he will see what they have made of his money when he returns.

The one who receives seven million dollars immediately goes off and makes trades with it, doubling the rich man's money: fourteen million dollars! The one who receives three million dollars does the same and doubles his money

as well: six million dollars! But the one who receives only one and a half million dollars is afraid he will lose money rather than gaining, so he digs a hole in the back yard and buries the treasure he has received, to at least preserve the principal.

After a long time, the super-rich man returns from his journey and calls his servants to account for how they have handled his wealth while he has been away. The one who received seven million dollars is proud to give the rich man fourteen million in return. The one who received three million dollars is similarly proud to tell how he turned it into six million. To each of these, the super-rich man says, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Then the third servant comes forward and says, "I was afraid of losing your money and incurring your anger, so I buried your treasure. Here it is. I didn't lose a penny of it. One and a half million dollars!" The super-rich man is furious! He says, "You could at least have put it in a bank. That way I would have earned a little interest!" And he kicks the servant out.

The first two servants approached their task from a position of abundance. Spiritual abundance. They knew they had what they needed to meet the moment, because the master had given them so much. And because they approached their task from a position of abundance, they succeeded. The third servant approached the same task from fear, from a position of

scarcity, aware only of what he did NOT have. And because he approached it from a position of scarcity, he failed.

We are like the servants in this parable, of course. God sets us challenging tasks in order to accomplish God's work in this world, and to be faithful servants, we must not shrink from those tasks, even if they seem overwhelming. But we are like the servants in another way, too. We have already received from God an amazing abundance – more than we could ever need – of time and skill and money and creativity. We already have what we need to meet the challenge we have been given by God, because when we face any challenge, we are using God's own abundant gifts, not our own. We just need to have the courage to use what God has given us to meet the moment, and not bury our treasure in the back yard. Like the servants in the parable, if we approach our task from a position of abundance, we will succeed. If we approach it from a position of scarcity, we will fail.

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Last year, on the anniversary of my coming to this church, I said we had a challenge to meet – to begin a Sunday School and make it work. I said we would never grow without it, but we shouldn't do it for that reason. We should offer a meaningful Christian Education program because the children who were already here deserved it. Do you remember? I know many of you thought "Ugh. Please don't ask me to do that." Others thought, "We've tried this before, and it was hard, and the kids didn't show up. It didn't work." I know you thought these things, because you told me so. But you stepped up,

and we have created a successful Sunday School program this year, one that the children were sad to lose for the summer. One that brought energy and vitality to our church. We met the challenge for this year, even when we thought we could not.

Our challenge for the coming year is different, but it is equally important to our future. A few weeks ago, we all learned that we have a sizeable hole to fill in our operating budget, in order to be sustainable financially going forward. The future of this church depends on our solving this challenge. It is the test of our church's stewardship of all that we have received from God and from the great cloud of witnesses who have handed this church down to us over the years. I am here to tell you this morning, as the scripture tells us, that – like the servants in the parable – we have already received from God everything that we need to meet this moment. If we approach this task from a position of abundance, aware of all the gifts and graces we have received from God, we will succeed. If we approach our task from a position of fear and scarcity, we will fail. So let's think about the gifts we have received that will help us meet this moment.

First, we received a lovely bequest from Nancy Kelley. It is enough to plug the hole in our budget for this year and also to increase our investments for the future, buying us time to make the adjustments we need to make. We will not squander this opportunity to make the decisions that will set this church on the right path. Through this bequest, God has given us the time

that we need, and we will be faithful stewards of it. Similarly, we are a well-endowed church, for our size. We have about three quarters of a million dollars in investments. That's about half a talent, right there. Many of those investments are restricted by our own choice. I am definitely not suggesting that we drain our investments. That is not a sustainable way to go into the future. Rather, they give us a security that many other churches of our size do not have. The bequest from Nancy Kelley and the investments we have built from similar gifts over the years give us time and space to do what we need to do.

Second, we have strong and creative leaders who are working to find options for us. When I think about that list of members who are working on this task, I am so grateful to them, and I am also grateful to God for raising up good and faithful leadership all across this church. God has given us the leadership that we need, and we will be faithful stewards of this gift.

Third, we each have talents that we already put to use to support the ministries of this church. Think of the Holly Fair, for instance. It is sort of like the church in the story I told a few moments ago. Some of us knit. Some make pies. Some can spot a treasure for a gift basket in the dollar store, from three aisles away. Some are good at marketing. When we put our talents together, we can do amazing things! God has given us the skills that we need, and we will be faithful stewards of them as well.

And finally, our church is filled with welcoming people who love each other and love God. That is a treasure. As you have already seen this year, as you will see again in a few moments, it is an expression of God's love that people want to join. We are not a failing church. We are the living, breathing Body of Christ, and we will make the decisions that we need to make and do the work that we need to do to be stable financially and to grow into the future. God has given us the church that this community needs, and we will be faithful stewards of it.

God has given us what we need to meet this moment, to close our budget deficit in a way that is not only fiscally sound but also faithful and true to our calling as a church. If we approach our task from a position of fear and scarcity, aware only of how large the problem is, afraid to take bold measures, we will fail, just like the third servant in the parable. But if we approach our task with confidence, aware of the great abundance that God has already given us, we will succeed.

I already know which choice this church will make, because I know all of you. Let us go forward with confidence in God's abundant love and care for our church and our community.

Amen