

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Parable of the Talents)

Proverbs 31:10-13,19-20,30-31; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30

The gospel today is familiar to a lot of us. We tend to think it's all about ability, or talent — what special gifts God has given each of us. Certainly, that's a big part of it. But I think there is more to the parable of the talents than just a lesson in using our abilities to sing or dance or juggle.

First, it's important to remember that in Jesus' day a talent was something concrete: it was an amount of money, a way of measuring something of great value. So he is speaking of something specific and very familiar to his audience.

In the parable, a talent is a measure of weight, roughly 75 pounds of silver. If the talents were of gold, the value of what was entrusted to the stewards would be very high.

So, when we hear 'talent,' we shouldn't imagine the wretched servant in the parable burying a coin, but going to great lengths to hide an enormous treasure.

In the parable we hear about "a man going on a journey that summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability." Since Jesus uses only the term "talents" we must make some assumptions, but it seems reasonable to assume that the owner of the talents, the man traveling into a far country, was a wealthy man. He is entrusting his wealth to three men who become stewards of his money.

From the beginning of the story we are told that the servant who received just one talent is a man of little ability. He is not a genius. Yet it is interesting to note that the master has a talent even for his relatively disadvantaged servant. As God's children we all have our talents, even those who appear to have very minimal abilities in comparison with the more gifted ones.

These stewards are entrusted with the care of the money. The master expects them to know Him well enough to apply the spirit as well as the letter of His instructions. The amount given is based on each steward's ability. The first two understand the spirit and letter of instructions and the character of their Lord. They both use the resources by "trading" to gain a profit, each making a 100 return.

Fear and mistrust of his Lord motivate the third steward who buries the money in the earth and returns the original amount. The profitable stewards are praised, given increased responsibilities and invited to enter into the joy of their Lord. The untrusting steward is scolded, rejected, and punished.

But there is a second element in the parable: it is what you *do* with that most precious commodity.

That is what the parable of the talents is really about. It is taking the greatest treasure that God has given us: you can call it a measure of God's grace, or God's love, or God's hope, or God's Word and sharing it. Letting it go into the world.

Each of the servants who is given some talents does something with what he's given. But the ones who prosper, who are rewarded, go out into the community. They share what they have been given. They exchange it. They barter. They invest it. They reap more with it.

But the servant who is punished hoards it. He keeps it to himself. Not only that, he digs a hole and hides it in the earth, where no one can see it and no one can find it, and it doesn't appreciate in value. He is afraid to risk any of it lest he lose it. He has simply ignored the gift and literally buried it.

And even though the first servant with five talents had made five more talents and the second servant with two talents had made two more talents, both of them receive exactly the same compliments: "Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master." They are rewarded not in proportion to how many talents each has made but in proportion to how many talents each of them initially received. Booker T. Washington once said that "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles that one has overcome while trying to succeed."

What good does the gospel do any of us if we don't live it?

What value does the gospel have to the world at large if we don't give it away?

The Master took a very long time to come back. This is a tiny but important detail in today's Gospel. It shows the Master's love for his servants that he gave them more than ample time for the treasure of the talents to yield much fruit. What is the precious thing that God has entrusted to us? The great treasure that we have been given is the gift of the Gospel; the realization that Jesus is our Savior and that through our faith in him we will find salvation. It is what we do with this gift that makes all the difference.

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Hopefully, we mix that gift of God freely given to us with the physical abilities (talents) we have also been given, and recognize that with all of this comes great responsibility.

We may have a talent for compassion. A talent for prayer. A talent for action. A talent for joy. A talent, even, for simply being present to another in a moment of need, or desperation, or pain.

These are more precious than gold. Each of us has these – and more – somewhere within our hearts. The message of this parable is: don't bury them. Take them into the world and make them grow.

So my message of hope is that whatever stage of life you are at, whether you are doubting, or struggling to make sense of the Gospel message, whether you are teaching the love of Jesus to your children, whether you are rejoicing in some new grace or blessing, whether you are going through the dark night of the soul, whether you are groping in darkness and searching for some glimmer of light; whatever it is that might be happening with your faith at least something is happening!

There is also a universal application to all of humankind. From the time of the creation, each individual has been entrusted with resources of time and material wealth. Everything we have comes from God and belongs to God. We are responsible for using those resources so that they increase in value. As Christians, we have additionally the most valuable resource of all – the Word of God. If we believe and understand God, and apply God's Word as good stewards, we become a blessing to others and the value of what we do multiplies. We are accountable to God for the use of these resources. Let's use them well.

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(with excerpts from Deacon Greg Kandra, Fr. Munachi Ezeogu and Fr. Alex McAllister)