

“The Parable of the Talents”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 25:14-30
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on November 19, 2017

This morning I want to walk us through two very different ways of reading this parable, not to mention today is also the day for my annual stewardship sermon, so we’ve got a lot of ground to cover in a short amount of time. The first way to read this parable is the traditional way—the way you’ve probably heard it interpreted in the past, which is to say that that God will be disappointed in us if do not use what we have been given. There are some good reasons to read it differently than that, which I will get to in a minute, but before we do that, let’s see what the traditional interpretation might have to say to us.

I was delighted to learn that in the 16th and 17th century, women used this parable to defend their right to preach and lead in the church, arguing that if God had given them the talent and capacity to do something, it would be wrong *not* to use their God-given gifts. For the church to force women to bury their talents in the ground was an injustice and an affront to God. Thus this text has been read to support the argument that all of us are called by God to use the gifts we’ve been given—whether it be our intellect, our voice, or our wisdom.

Of course, in the actual parable, talents are currency, not abilities. A talent was an amount of money equal to about twenty years of wages. When we use this parable to talk about “burying our talents” we are turning the story into an allegory, which may or may not have been the storyteller’s original intent.

But because this parable has routinely been allegorized for centuries, let’s go with that interpretation for a bit and see where it takes us, especially given the month of the year known to most of the church universal as the month leading up to Advent, but known around Lake Shore as the month in which our pledge cards are due.

I do want us to think a minute about the analogy of burying one’s talents, not just in terms of whether we’re willing to give of our own gifts and time and resources to the church, but also in terms of whether the church is willing to give gifts and time and resources to the work of God’s kingdom. It seems to me there is more than one way to burying talents. You could hoard your gifts and your blessings to yourself as an individual; that is certainly true.

Also, we could hoard our collective talents and resources to ourselves as a congregation. As a community, we could expend all our time and energy and money to maintain and preserve this institution and its building, so that everything we spend goes right back into this one plot of earth and doesn’t reach outwards into the community around us.

Now, don't misunderstand me to be saying that I think we ought to stop paying the electric bill or paying the staff. I'm not quite ready to talk myself out of an income. But I'm sure you're aware that the older an institution grows, the more the daily maintenance and upkeep of the institution begins to suck up everyone's time and the organization's money. The original mission of a place easily becomes secondary to the preservation of the institution, and we start serving and working in order to keep the institution the way it was rather than working and serving to do God's work in the world and listen close for the Wind of the Spirit and the calling of transformation. The shift is subtle and slow, and we don't usually even notice it is happening. We start to need more and more volunteers just to keep the show running, and sometimes we lose sight of why we're putting on this show in the first place.

So when we talk about stewardship, let us be challenged—not only to think about the ways in which God might be calling us as individuals to participate more fully in the life of this community we call the church both with our finances and our time—let us also think collectively about how God might be calling us as a group and as a church to use our finances and time for the good of the world and in service to the poor. Let us make sure we are not digging holes in our own property, keeping all the goods right here rather than allowing our gifts to blossom and bear fruit around our city and around our world.

And yet, to read this parable as an allegory about how we use our God-given talents glosses over the parable's disturbing details. According to the parable, the third servant hid his money because the master was “a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not scatter seed.” When the master discovered the servant's lack of profit, he angrily cast him into the outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth.

If we presume this parable to be an allegory in which “master” equals “god,” we have on our hands a harsh and exacting god, quick to condemn and averse to showing mercy. Compare the master in this parable to the father in the parable of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke, and we are left with two very different images: one image is of a generous father who literally runs to greet his estranged son who wantonly wasted *all* of his inheritance. The other image depicts a slave master who instantaneously and without hesitation casts out anyone who fails to be productive.

Or compare this parable of the talents to the parable of the workers in the vineyard from Matthew 20 in which those who worked only one hour are given the same wages as those who worked all day—again, an image of a lavishly, almost ridiculously generous God who values you for showing up at all, regardless of the volume of your accomplishments.

I believe images matter—that the visuals either enhance or damage our experience of God—and so as I searched for artwork to display on our Sunday morning worship guides, I couldn't bring myself to select any of the art depicting a master casting away his servant or an image of servants fearfully awaiting a verdict from their master or a picture of a servant with arms full of some 200

years worth of wages gleefully being given even more as it is taken from someone with much less. None of these images help me connect with God. To put it more bluntly, none of these images reveal God. Instead they display profit and greed, things the Bible calls the root of all evil.

I chose instead a different biblical image to introduce our worship this morning—that of the tearful father embracing with affection the prodigal son come home. To me this image has the power to tell us something true about God, even limited as it is by color and gender, a particular artist's interpretation and the snapshot brevity of a larger story. There is a spiritual truth shining there, transcending the limitations of the image.

Not so with the master in the parable of the talents. I do not experience anything transcendent here.

What are we to make of this uncomfortable disparity of images? Was Jesus confused about what God was like? In reading today's text, are we to throw out our notion of a compassionate God and accept instead a taskmaster of a God intent on earning profit? How do we both take this passage seriously AND take seriously the compassion of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ?

First we must take a moment to understand parables as a genre. One does not interpret a sci-fi film the same way as a historical drama the same way as a slapstick comedy. The Bible too is made up of various genres, and parables are Jesus' particular favorite. It is worth noting that many parables do *not* operate allegorically in which every character and detail represents something else. Take, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan in which the Samaritan is not code for God or anyone else but simply functions as a Samaritan. The Levite is a Levite, the priest is a priest. The power of that particular parable is rooted not in allegory but in the surprising reality of an actual Samaritan behaving with more compassion than a priest.

For some reason (I suspect the patriarchy) we have been conditioned to think that every time a parable features a ruler, a king, or a master, the man in authority must represent God regardless of whether or not Jesus himself draws any such comparison.

So let us suspend for a moment our automatic assumption that the master is God in this parable. In fact, given his irascible behavior, it is probably safer and more accurate to assume the master is not God. What if the master is simply a master and the parable is not a proper allegory but rather a simple story? If we read it again, removing God as master, what does the parable say this time?

To help with this rereading, let's zoom out a bit and look at what Jesus says both before and after. Another guideline for understanding parables—or any part of the Bible, for that matter—is to look at the full context. Knowing the whole story is often critical to the work of interpretation.

Jesus tells three parables in this chapter of Matthew, and the first one is about the bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom in which Jesus seems to be reminding the disciples to remain alert—God’s kingdom is at hand. Second Jesus tells the parable of the talents that we read today. And finally he tells the parable of the sheep and goats which imagines a scene at the end of the age in which the Son of Man separates all the people into sheep or goats based on whether they took care of the least of these. In this final parable—which depicts God’s final judgment—God is not at all concerned with profit or wealth. God is concerned with whether people took care of each other. Once again, this image of God stands in sharp contrast to the master in the parable of the talents whose primary (or only) concern is the accumulation of wealth.

Consider also the servants’ behavior in the parable of the talents. As many biblical commentators have noted, if the first two servants really did double their wealth by trading their money, they must have done so by lending out money and charging egregious interest, thus exploiting the poor to increase their master’s spoils.

Could it be that with these three consecutive parables, Jesus is telling his disciples: 1) to stay alert for God’s coming kingdom because 2) while the world works like a rat race in which you accumulate more by taking from the less fortunate, 3) God’s kingdom does not work that way at all. God judges people not by their wealth or even their work ethic but by the care and attention they give to the poor. If the parable of the talents is a story about the greedy way the world is versus the compassionate way God’s kingdom operates, then suddenly the third servant who buried his money is no longer a failure but an example of a brave resistor who refused to exploit his neighbor in order to please the powers or work his way up the ladder. Thus the powers cast him out, much in the same way the powers will reject Christ himself for siding with the oppressed rather than supporting the authority of the religious and political leaders.

When we read the parable this way, stewardship then is about more than using one’s talents for good. Stewardship is also the active resistance to corruption and an unwavering commitment to the downtrodden and the outcast. It is paying careful attention with our time and our money to whomever it is society has deemed to be “the least of these.”

Thus the call to give to the church is not a quiet, private act of the genteel but the radical behavior of Christ’s own revolutionaries who are faithful enough to keep believing in a different world and a different kingdom, who risk their reputations, their positions, and even their finances to keep this faith. Amen.