

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 15, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“The Masked Idol has Talent – You’re Fired”

Scriptures:

Judges 4:1–7

Psalm 123

1 Thessalonians 5:1–11

Matthew 25:14–30

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The Parable of the Talents – a source of great discussion among scholars, preachers, and everyday disciples.

Some like it, some hate it, some don’t understand it, by their own admission.

It’s the appraisal *of all things* that is on Jesus’ mind as he approaches his final days in Jerusalem.

Perhaps sensing his own days might be numbered at that point, he sits with his disciples and wants to talk to them about it, and let them know that there will be some kind of reckoning.

The Son of Man will return.

I find that not much of modern-day Christianity likes to touch on this aspect very much.

Unfortunately, we have tended to leave talk about the end of time and things like the judging of the living and the dead to Hollywood.

Maybe it’s because we feel it doesn’t fit our overly scientific worldview.

Maybe it’s because deep down it brings fear.

Regardless, one of the topics that Jesus brings up with a good deal of regularity during the time with his disciples is his return at the end of the ages to claim his kingdom of righteousness in full.

To take Jesus seriously means taking to heart what he says about the future.

What he says this morning about the future is often called the parable of the talents, and I don’t know if it’s just a sign of the influence of the times is having on me, but doesn’t this read like an episode of “The Apprentice”?

A man plans to go on long trip, but before he leaves, he decides to leave his slaves in charge of everything.

He gives each of them a different portion of the estate, kind of like when you go on vacation for a while and you hire one person to take care of the yard and but find a neighborhood kid to come in and water your plants and feed the cat.

Talents were a way of grouping money in the ancient world, and it is estimated that one talent was worth about twenty years' wages.

So, to the first slave the man gives control of about one hundred years of wages.

The second slave gets the equivalent of forty years' wages, and the last slave about a year's worth.

So, in the end this isn't just like leaving the neighborhood kid in charge of the plants and cat food.

These are vast sums of money, and with them comes vast responsibility and authority.

Jesus says the man entrusts the slaves with it.

One translation says he "*handed over*" his property to them, which means it is implied they are supposed to do something with it.

In fact, it sounds like they are supposed to do with the man's property whatever he would have done with it while he's away.

So off they go.

We learn the one who was given one hundred years' wages uses it to develop a cool new technology that enables people to carry around little computerized phone cameras in their pockets.

Pretty soon everyone in the world buys one and uses them to share photos of what they're eating and get into political arguments with each other.

He doubles the money that was given to him!

The second slave decides to go the food route and uses the forty years of wages given to him to start a company of really fancy stores that will just serve coffee.

And he imagines people will be willing to spend over two dollars for one cup of this coffee, even if they get it in a paper cup.

People think he's silly and that he's just throwing his master's money away, but look who's laughing now!

Can we say \$8 Pumpkin Spice Latte!? He, too, doubles his money in no time.

The third guy is nervous about this whole responsibility thing.

He knows better than to go risking his master's money on anything.

And he's definitely not going to spend a dime of it on something as frivolous as a smartphone or an overpriced cup of coffee.

So, he figures the best thing to do is just find a shoebox, put the money in there, and shove it under his bed until the master comes back.

Well, it takes a really long time for the master to come back.

The amount of time is never the issue,

The point is that there is some sort of performance appraisals when he does. The first two slaves are rewarded.

How does the master phrase his evaluation?

"You will be entrusted with even more responsibility and property!"

More than that, they receive the joy of their master.

The third guy?

Not so much, and as it turns out the master is not all that worried about how he spins this appraisal.

Wicked, lazy, and worthless is what he gets called, in no uncertain terms, and then the master looks at him across the boardroom table and says, *"You're fired!"*

The real matter, of course, is that the third slave misjudged his responsibility because of a fundamental misunderstanding about the master.

The slave lived in fear.

For whatever reason he thought his master was harsh, unscrupulous, although it's hard to know why a man who left slaves in charge of so much could ever be thought of as harsh.

The master is generous and giving, willing to take enormous risks.

So, if the slaves are to follow the master's lead, they, too, should be willing to risk, to see time not as something to be endured, passed through, but as potential for growing, changing, learning.

To tend his gifts, to safeguard them, means to use them even if you're not really sure where it might take you.

This is Jesus' lesson about the future for his disciples.

In the time when they're waiting for his return, they should be working, serving, taking risks.

Sharing the gifts God has given wisely but generously is precisely what our heavenly Father intends for us to do.

Preserving and protecting our lives, keeping everything as-is simply because that's how we received it is not our mission as disciples.

And neither is focusing too much on the amount of talent or treasure we have received. For this parable is not really about money at all.

It's about the whole of our lives, our heart, our joy.

As one famous English clergyman from the 1800's once said,

"The greatest of all mistakes is to do nothing because you can only do a little. Do what you can."

Putting ourselves and our unique constellation of gifts out into the world, into the service of our neighbor, is precisely what we're called to do as Jesus' followers.

The thought we could somehow ever lose what God has given us is a lie the devil tells.

Risk is part of the kingdom's strategy.

Risk is factored into the whole shooting match, right from that first moment by the fishing boats in Galilee to the church capital campaign.

Look at the risk God himself takes by sending Jesus!

On the cross, God goes all in for us, lays it all out there, investing everything God has for the sake of you and me.

And even though it looks like Jesus loses it all—even though it looks for a moment or two that his decision to live for God's kingdom and not Caesar's was terribly unwise—he doesn't.

On the third day he rises, promising to us all the joy of his Master.

This is not harsh at all.

This is grace, for you and me.

One of my favorite things to do each day is to read the obituaries in the *Toronto Star*.

Many of them contain endless lists of loving relatives.

Some of them note the life's work or generosity or dedicated community service of the deceased

I find it inspiring and fascinating to find out how different people around the province have invested or shared their lives.

Some Examples:

The man who invented salt and vinegar chips

A woman who made suits for Pierre Elliott Trudeau

A woman who was the largest baby ever born in Nova Scotia

The man who made and distributed **RES DAN** – a dandruff treatment popular in the 60's

Glenn Gould's piano tuner

Some of the lives remembered are more tragic than, others, of course, but many seem to contain at least somewhere an element of a life that was not buried in the ground.

Do we approach the suspense of our death—or of Jesus' second coming, whichever comes first—with a sense of fear and foreboding,
that we can put it off indefinitely,
that we can stop the ever-rolling stream,
or

do we approach the suspense of our deaths and Jesus' return with the sense of duty to grow and share and serve the world with joy?

Can we incorporate death into life, the final appraisal into each daily task?

It seems that's what Jesus is up to, in fact.

- Passing around the cup and the loaf on the night he was betrayed.
- Weeping at the tomb of Lazarus before he calls him forth to life.

- Offering forgiveness and compassion even as he hangs there dying.

We incorporate our own death to sin that happens in baptism into life for the world around us.

The Reverend Phillip W. Martin, Jr.,

Therefore, called forth by this master, let us do with our talents what God himself would do with them if he were the one waiting.

Let's live as the bold advertisements that can go on the opposite page to death

...advertisement that say loud and clear, with each breath that what is given by God is greater and more generous than we could ever imagine

...that say with each day that what is given by God can never be truly lost, but only goes on to more extraordinary adventures.

Thanks be to God – Creator, Saviour, Spirit....AMEN

Call to Worship

(based on Matthew 25: 14-30)

The time for harvest is close at hand.

What have you done with the gifts God has given you?

We have brought our gifts to the house of the Lord.

Praise God for the gifts and for opportunities for service that they represent.

We praise God for all the ways in which our lives have been blessed.

Generous God, accept our gifts and our lives this day.

Loving God, accept our praise and gratitude. AMEN.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Transforming God, you take the night and give us day.

You take our strife and give us peace. You take our sadness and give us joy.

You take our fear and give us courage. You take death and give us new life.

You give grace beyond all expectation; you give love beyond all imagination;
you give and you give and you give.

So we praise and adore you as Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit,

Compassionate and loving God, we confess we have not always lived faithfully.

We fill our days with things that do not matter. We seek simple answers to complex issues.

We are weighed down by many tasks yet we cannot sort out our priorities. We fail to hear
your call on our lives.

Hear our silent confession and forgive us, merciful God, In Jesus' name. AMEN

Words of Assurance

Hear the Good News:

We have not been faithful in all things.

But our God still welcomes us with patience and kindness.

Therefore, as people of God's promise,

let us receive forgiveness, embrace hope, and faithfully respond,
through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We thank you, God of all life and each life, that you are with us every day, in each challenge
and opportunity.

In our weakness, you are strength. In our darkness, you are light on the journey.

In our questions, you are wisdom for our choices.

Stay with us in these days when so much seems uncertain, and help us to serve you
faithfully, when, and as we are able.

God of loving kindness: we give you thanks for moments of joy and celebration in our lives
even amidst the ongoing pandemic, for love given and received,
for friendships which bring us meaning and happiness, even at a distance,
and for family members who show us glimpses of unconditional love.

In all our relationships and interactions, keep us mindful of your call to see you in one
another.

God of the nations, we pray for our country and the countries of this world,
as we all struggle to face the choices COVID-19 sets before us.

Guide those who frame laws and shape policy, and those who keep the peace and administer justice.

There are so many new challenges to consider and we pray your wisdom will open our leaders' minds and hearts to develop more equitable ways of ordering our communities.

God of peace, we remember with sadness the dangerous divisions between nations and the games leaders play to get the better of each other.

By your Holy Spirit, move in places torn by war and violence, to protect the vulnerable and those who advocate for justice to prevail.

Show us how to be peacemakers in troubled times.

God of healing: we pray for those who are suffering in these difficult days of pandemic, for those who mourn the loss of someone or something dear.

Draw close to all who fear the future. Surround each one with your love and show us how to bring comfort and support into situations of hurt and pain.

God of life: you hold all souls in your loving care, the dead as well as the living.

We thank you for your saints of every age who continue to inspire us, and for all who have meant the world to us and now live with you.

Keep us in communion with them and, at the last, bring us all to dwell together in your light.

And now we pray in the words that Jesus taught us, saying:

The Lord's Prayer

*Our Father in Heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, On earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread.*

Forgive us our sins As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial And deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, Now and forever. Amen.

Stewardship Thought

Rebecca Solnit (1961-), writer

Every minute of every hour of every day you are making the world, just as you are making yourself, and you might as well do it with generosity and kindness and style.

Benediction

(based on Matthew 25: 14-30)

Go in peace; love and care for one another in Christ's name,
and may God bless you with every gift needful for His work,
may the Spirit grant you the willingness to risk yourself
completely for the sake of the gospel,
and may the love and the compassion and the hope and the faith
of Jesus dwell richly within you till the time of his coming.
both now and forevermore. Amen