

Exodus 16:13-21
Matthew 25:14-30

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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In Praise of Buried Talents

So take the talent from him, and give it to the one who has ten talents. . . . As to this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." *Matthew 25:28, 30.*

Perhaps you've noticed how words can radically change meaning over time. Take that little word "let" for instance. Where it means "allow" to us now, a few hundred years ago it meant just the opposite—"hinder." In tennis it retains the old meaning, that the ball was hindered in its flight. Incidentally, the first recorded tennis match is right there in the Bible in 2 Samuel, "David served in Saul's court." I'm just the messenger! Or take the word batman, which began not as comic book superhero but a military officer's personal aide. "Allege" morphed to mean "prove," "conversation" turned into "conduct," "prevent" became "precede."

Now here's one that took a really nasty turn. It didn't change its meaning so much as it took on angelic disguise. It's the word "talent." In today's parable it has been consistently construed as gifts or special abilities—"God-given talents." But nothing could be further from the truth.

It was our own Paul Steege, in a devotional at a Session meeting some months ago, who opened my eyes to the real implications of the parable. So I started to do some digging. Like thousands of pastors and commentators before me, I've always understood the "parable of the talents," as it's invariably called, as an allegory of Christian's sowing the good news of God. The five and two talent servants/slaves (it's the same word in Greek) gained favor by doubling their master's investment, while the miserable one talent servant, in fear and trembling, buries his talent. But for many readers of this parable there are nagging misgivings. Called to accounts, the one talent slave says of his master, "I knew you to be a *harsh* master"—it's the same word used of Pharaoh's hardheartedness. Glowering at the miserable slave, the master/Lord (again the same word, which adds to the red-herring flavor) castigates him for not investing the money with the bankers. Yet usury and interest taking are entirely contrary to biblical law. Then the master commands that they "throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This hardly sounds like the compassionate, just and loving God of Jesus we've come to know.

The first clue that this isn't a parable about *God* is it's opening line. Eleven times Matthew begins parables about the kingdom of heaven—the kingdom Jesus seeks that *we* build on earth, with the words "the kingdom of heaven is like." That's how the parable of the wise and foolish virgins begins, right before this one. But not here. It's missing "the kingdom of heaven is like" because this is not about *God's* kingdom. Instead, it's very much about the world we have constructed, which is the antithesis of God's kingdom.

A talent was a measure of wealth—not a coin but a weight, a very heavy weight between 50 and 80 pounds of silver. A denarius was a day's wage, so one talent equaled about 15 years wages. For someone working 50 hours a week at today's minimum wage that's over a quarter of a million dollars. Five talents, going on \$1½ million, which he then doubled for the master. This is not small change. Neither is this about our God. It's about a very worldly and ruthless task-master. A harsh, demanding man who believes that those who have should have more, and who, without a conscience consigns to poverty and begging (i.e. "the outer darkness") those who cannot produce for him.

Wealthy landowners in Jesus' day would finance crop production of small farmers, charging exorbitant rates far above the 12 percent cap that the rabbis condoned (still contrary to biblical law). When the crop failed or the smallholding went into debt, wealthy landowners called in the debt, foreclosing the property and taking

the land, thereby forcing the former owners into servitude to survive. 700 years before, the prophet Isaiah, a Prince of Israel, issued a scathing condemnation of such landowners (Is. 5:8, *Revised English Bible*).

“Woe betide those who add house to house
and join field to field,
until everyone else is displaced,
and you [landowners] are left as sole inhabitants of the countryside.

Four centuries before this, Samuel, the first of the great prophetic line in Israel, warned the people who clamored for a king like their neighbors:

“These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you.... He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to his horsemen, and to run before his chariot.... and some to plow the ground and some to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war.... He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take onetenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take onetenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves.... But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:11-20).

Wealthy landowners, such as Jesus and Samuel portray, perpetuated and accelerated the cycle of servitude, debt and poverty. To the poor among Jesus’ hearers the plight of the one talent servant must have sounded like a courageous whistleblower unwilling to be a party to the corruption by “investing” his master’s money, thereby underwriting a policy that doomed legions of poor to lifelong servitude.

Discipleship, for Jesus “means forsaking the seductions and false securities of the debt system for an economy that [has enough] for everyone,” says Will Willimon. There is potentially enough. The world population has grown 34 fold since Jesus time and, rightly managed, still has ample resources for all, but our economic system favors wealth and stifles the poor.

Tragically, our traditional interpretation of this parable, when stripped of its true social setting, has rendered precisely the opposite of Jesus’ intentions. We have substituted our own notion of a “talent,” as a natural ability to do something well, for the unscrupulous management of illicit gain. The point was patently obvious to the poor in Jesus’ audience who were centuries old victims of economic slavery.

The great tragedy, two thousand years later, is that the same essential system still claims us. Millions of fellow citizens have sold their our souls to the system. We see its implications in the erosion of the middle class, enclaves of the super-wealth who have stripped the market bare, and tens of thousands of small farmers who have vanished from the land. And the prophet Samuel’s warning about the military establishment has become a dragon eating its own tail.

The oddity is that so many of us find ourselves with far less peace of mind—for all of our so-called “advancements”—than in the relative halcyon days of childhood. We angst over our diminished quality of life (tied inextricably to the economic system, relational strife, and financial anxiety. We wince at the Catch-22 irony of pouring trillions of dollars into the very system that—so furtively, we discover—led us, complicitly for the most part, into a financial equivalent of Edgar Allan Poe’s “Descent into the Maelstrom.”

In the parable, Jesus calls us back to equilibrium with God. What an opportunity we have, for great cultural stress has always offered seminal opportunities. Take the green revolution. Thousands of businesses are now hyping concern for the environment, and so be it if it contributes to saving the only home our grandchildren have. We suffer the castor oil of a downturn in consumer spending, but that too is good if it adjusts our craving to manage with less. There’s the emerging prospect of businesses cooperating with former competitors to the advantage of both. And now see something of the same emerging in international relations. With less disposable income, families have opportunities to evaluate how more simply to use their time

together, to everyone's benefit. The last couple of weeks, after confirmation, I sat to the side and listened to the stimulating conversation of relative strangers talking intimately about their faith and life after Supper at St. John's. I've experienced a noticeable increase in people asking for devotional literature and resources for personal faith development. And folks saying, "Pastor, would you offer a sermon on . . ." There's a growing sense that as a people we've been far too self-indulgent, and we don't like it. And I feel an emerging trend among our churches toward congregations sharing best practices. I know it's happening in local government, and perhaps elsewhere.

Less is more. Getting our minds off ourselves, where they least need to be, can be revelatory. You know how true that is from your own experience. Indeed the very next passage in Matthew is the last judgment, where the followers of Jesus are encouraged to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned, because, said Jesus, "Insofar as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

When the people of the church volunteer to enter that "outer darkness"—which lies both without and within, who could guess that such a paradox would be a place to find hope!

Amen.