

“Good Stewards”
 Matthew 25:14-30
 Pledge Sunday
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“A certain man goes on a journey,” our parable begins, and right away you know there’s going to be some great adventure, some challenge to be overcome. All hero stories begin this way, like Jason and the Argonauts, or Superman; even Jesus’ own life in the gospels is told this way – Jesus, who is summoned from his safety at the right hand of God to venture down to earth, to wrestle with the devil in the desert, and argue with the scribes in the Temple, and face down his own fears and doubts that dark night in Gethsemane.

“A certain man goes on a journey,” our story begins; but then we’re startled that in *this* story, the adventure won’t involve the man who goes away. Instead, the ones he has left behind receive the summons; and their challenge is this: will they tend the Master’s treasure while he’s gone?

Our parable from Matthew that we heard today is the story of our summons, and our challenge: our challenge in the time between our Master, Jesus’, departure, and his return back to this earth. The story of the talents is not about our gifts and abilities and whether we use them well; that’s just an unfortunate fluke of our English language. The story of the talents is not about our use of wealth, even though the “talent” in this story was a huge unit of money, around two years of income. The story of the talents is about the problem of eschatology: that is, about the “end times,” when Jesus returns, and how we live until he comes back (cf. Thomas Long, *Matthew*, p. 281).

Let me be the first to admit that eschatology is not a popular topic for sermons in the mainline pulpit. While the evangelical- and fundamentalist-right talk freely about Jesus’ return – the *Left Behind* book series is a runaway bestseller – the second coming of Christ is barely mentioned in our circles. In some ways, that’s not a big deal – there are plenty of other timely subjects to tackle in the 15 or 20 minutes I get each week. But in other ways, it *is* a big deal: because the New Testament is absolutely loaded with the issue. Close to a quarter of the verses in the gospels is devoted to it; every one of Paul’s letters wrestles with it; the entire book of Revelations is consumed by it. The earliest Christians – the disciples who followed the earthly Jesus and the next two generations after them – the earliest Christians *expected* Jesus to come again, *in their lifetime*. And when he didn’t return, as they hoped that he would, they had to wrestle with an unexpected question: how should they live in the meantime?

It is this question that our New Testament readings address today. Notice that the question is not “*when* will Jesus return?”: Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, the *earliest* Christian writing we have, already warns not to try to predict the Lord’s return, for he will come “as a thief in the night.” In the gospel of Matthew, a few verses before the ones we read, Jesus himself warns that “no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come” (Matthew 24:36, 42). Of course, human nature being what it is, from the very beginning, prognosticators have tried to read the “signs” like tea leaves ... and to my knowledge, so far none of them has been right. (There is, by the way, a wickedly funny episode of the Simpson’s on this very subject.) Which leads us back to the real question, the one to which Scripture points us: not *when* will Jesus return, but *how shall we live in the meantime?*

With this question in mind, let's take another look at our story. A certain man goes on a journey, but before he leaves, he summons his servants, divides his property among them, not evenly, but according to what they can handle, and leaves them with both authority and responsibility for its care. The first servant, who is given five talents, invests and trades on it, taking some obvious risks, and doubles his master's money. The second servant, who is given two talents, does the same – investing, trading, risking, and doubling his money. But the one who receives the one talent – he is cautious, conservative, and prudent. He takes no risks, he takes no chances, and instead buries his master's money in the ground – which according to Rabbinic law, released him from liability for the funds, it being the safest, most prudent thing he could do.

Now when the Master returns from the journey, how will he respond? To the first two servants, he heaps on praise: “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master.” But as John Buchanan astutely notes:

“That's a funny definition of trustworthiness, is it not? These fellows took real risks. You don't double your investment by playing conservatively. Everyone knows that—you must be willing to risk losing it all. The man might have said, ‘Well done, courageous slave,’ or ‘foolish slave,’ or ... ‘very lucky slave.’ But good and trustworthy? I don't think so.

“Slave #3, the [kind of person you want on your] Board of Trustees, the prudent, cautious conservative, proudly presents this man with his money intact: no gains, no losses, no risks. And the response is astonishingly harsh. You might expect the man to say something like, ‘Well OK. You did what you could. You followed your best instincts. You were admirably cautious and respectful of my property.’ Instead, the response is almost violent—‘You wicked, lazy slave—take the money from him and throw him out into the street’” (from a sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, 10/10/99).

What went wrong here? The third slave grossly misjudged what his Master expected – not just the preservation of his treasure, but its *multiplication*. Playing it safe wasn't going to get the job done. Passive waiting for the Master's return wasn't going to be enough. The Master gave his slaves not just responsibility, but also his authority, expecting them to take big risks with his treasure. The third slave's failure came in playing it safe, playing it small.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what this means for us. Jesus has left us with his treasure: the good news of God's mercy for the world. This good news – literally, this gospel – is what Jesus gave his very life to share with us. Until he returns, the world is in our care. He has made us stewards of his gospel now.

And if we are wise, this will strike fear into our hearts, for any number of reasons.

What are we afraid of? Maybe we're afraid that we will get God's will wrong ... that we'll misinterpret the Master's hopes and dreams and message. The centuries have seen plenty of overzealous “superChristians” wreak havoc on the world, in Jesus' name. We shudder at the Crusades, ancient and modern, and well we should. I worry about the overconfident believers who are convinced that they are single-handedly channeling the will of Christ.

Or maybe we're afraid that we'll be distracted from our own priorities when we take on the Master's mission. You can't serve two masters, Jesus said, and taking on responsibility for Jesus' will on earth means that we may have to choose between, say a comfortable spring vacation or a work trip down to Ocean Springs, Mississippi; or choose between remodeling our kitchens and rescuing Pakistani earthquake victims before the snows come to the mountains; or choose between staying silent when a gossipy, slanderous tidbit is being tossed around, and saying something, which wins you few friends. We should be properly afraid that taking on the Master's treasure will demand things from us.

Or maybe we're afraid that we are inadequate to the task. Honestly, why the Lord thinks we are prepared and trained and capable and faithful enough to take on his entire agenda escapes me. If we're even close to "getting it" about what he wants: like peace on earth, the hungry fed, the creation tended, the Lord honored ... well, it is daunting.

Or maybe we're afraid of this: maybe we're afraid of our success.

Recently Don Dempsey shared this quotation that is attributed to Nelson Mandela. Mandela, one of the architects of the anti-apartheid victory in South Africa, reflects on the terror in our hearts that we will be used, and used well, used powerfully, used effectively, to change the world. Out of his own experience, Mandela says:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, ... talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small doesn't serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. You are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within you."

"Playing small doesn't serve the world," and it doesn't serve the Master's needs. We are entrusted with the *gospel*: with the message of God's love for all ... with the promise of Christ's peace on earth ... with the good news of the wholeness that is God's will for every child. And who are we to bury that treasure? I happen to believe that it is the most exciting privilege that we will ever bear. It is a purpose so much larger than we are, not just to enjoy the treasure entrusted to us, but to make it multiply ... by loving generously in the face of meanness; by living boldly in the face of fear; by living hopefully in spite of sorry and grief.

This church has a history of that, you know. The more I learn, the more impressed, and hopeful, I am. Did you know that this church was founded by abolitionists whose work was pivotal – not only in saving individual lives – but in turning the tide of public opinion about whether black folk were fully *human*, and deserving of "inalienable rights"; and that, in part because of our church's founders, this is one of the first towns where freedmen and whites owned businesses side by side, and did commerce with each other? And did you know that this church helped found a number of educational institutions, including what is now Lake Forest Academy, along with Lake Forest College, and eventually, McCormick Seminary? This boldness – it's in our DNA. I'm convinced it's in us to risk – not just a little, not even just some, but all of who we are, for the sake of the gospel ... for the sake of following Jesus, who squandered himself for us, spent himself on us, loved us so much he was willing to die for our sake, and he asks us to live like he did. Not to be victims and martyrs, but to hurl ourselves into the enterprise of God.

I don't know what that enterprise is here, yet, in this season of our church's life. I certainly can't say what that enterprise looks like for you, in your own challenges, your own

adventures, your own very private and public choices. What I do know is that the Lord needs us, right now, to be risk-taking, courageous, trustworthy stewards for his will on earth, until he comes again.

I have come to believe that when we do this -- when we give ourselves over to this highest calling, it is then that we will find true joy. Not merely happiness, not merely satisfaction, but deep, abiding, unquenchable joy.

George Bernard Shaw may not be known as a theologian, but he captures the heart of it this way:

“This is the true joy of life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no ‘brief candle’ to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.” (cited by John M. Buchanan, 10/10/99).

“A certain man goes on a journey,” and we are given a great responsibility. Today is Pledge Sunday in our congregation, the day we commit our monetary promises to this church for the year ahead. But I, for one, hope it is much more than that. I pray this is a day to recommit ourselves, to be stewards for the kingdom, worthy stewards of God’s gracious will. And in the end, our reward will be no less than this: “Well done ... well done, good and trustworthy servant. Enter into the joy of your Master.” Amen.