

“Talents Unrevealed”
Pentecost 23; 10:00 am
Matthew 25:14-30; November 19, 2017
Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO
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I. WHO LEAVES TOWN AND LEAVES THEIR SLAVES IN CHARGE?

Anyone notice that this story is problematic, right off the bat?! That there’s something fishy right from the get-go? In this day of wondering what’s real and what’s “fake news,” we should be at least a *little* skeptical, right from the start!

“A man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them.”

That. Right there. What is wrong with this picture?!

How many of you have ever gone away on a journey? Not to Denver for the day, but a loooonnnnng journey? Maybe to Kansas, at least? Or Nebraska, or Chicago?

And when you prepared to leave the house and your pets, you made some preparations. You might have called Alicia Allinger to come care for your beloved dogs and cats. You might have asked a friend to check your mail and plow the driveway if snow should happen to fall.

Okay. And then, you might have gone to the bank and withdrawn *thousands* of dollars, and brought it home, and called your three servants to a meeting and started doling out huge bundles of cash and said, “Don’t spend it all in one place! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do! Have a nice day!”

Or, maybe you might not.

II. OF TALENTS AND OTHER TREASURES

What was this guy thinking? What was he up to? Was this come kind of “get rich quick” scheme? Or even money laundering?

Interpreters have had fun with this parable over the years because you can just go in so many directions! I have to think Jesus enjoyed using parables as a teaching tool for just that reason. He definitely liked to make his listeners think. Puzzle. Ponder. (And by listeners, that means us! Though Jesus might not have realized at the time how far into the future his words would go.

Part of the puzzlement is the word “talent.” It has morphed into something different in our day—about skills, abilities, something we’re good at. Or not! Maybe we just enter the Talent Show anyway!

In Jesus’ day, a talent was a measure. In the Old Testament times it was a weight for measuring grain or other goods. By the New Testament it had come to represent a sum of money. *A large* sum of money!

And, actually, if you google it up, you will find that scholars and historians have ideas all over the map for how much a talent represented. Was it \$1000 like the Message translation says? Or \$30,000? Or somewhere in between? Or even a *million* dollars, as some have suggested! A lifetime's wages—either for a peasant or a king? And, really does Jesus care?!

Here's the deal: A talent was a LOT. For our purposes, in today's world, imagine it to be about a million dollars. For one! Those guys they were given more, were up with the high rollers with their 5 mil and 10 mil, respectively.

Those guys. Those slaves. The three hired hands, best men, work crew. Those guys were called together and given millions of dollars, and the landowner disappeared for a very long time.

Millions entrusted to the slaves! Not the friends; not the business partner. Not the designated power of attorney. But the slaves. The servants. The hired (or not) help!

What's up with that? What kind of man does that? I told you this story was a little fishy!

III. TERROR OF NUMBER THREE!

Because, then, note how this kind, generous man is described. He sounds like a very *generous* and trusting man to me, but, that's not the picture we get of him here in the story. What's *that* about?!

"I knew you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed," says Servant #3.

Where does *that* come from? Slave #3 appears to have a whole different perspective on this rich guy than the other slaves. We won't psychoanalyze him and wonder what kind of background issues might come into play here, for this # 3 guy to be so jaded against the Boss.

But, we *should* look at him and where he's coming from. He's petrified! Scared to death that he's going to be taken to task—or worse—by The Man if he loses even one penny of the money entrusted to him. He's so terrified he doesn't even put the treasure in the bank so it can gain interest, but buries it in the ground! Boy, that guy's got Trust Issues.

Look at the other two. No concerns whatsoever, it would appear. And remember—they were entrusted with five and *ten* times more money! More to gain than #3 and much more to **lose**! And they invested it. Quite well, in fact.

They didn't have any issues with the landowner. Well, they didn't as long as the investments went well and they didn't sell his money and property down the river in some "get rich quick scheme!" Or invest in hedge funds!

IV. TERROR OF THE MISDIRECTED IDEA

So, why is the third servant so afraid?

Is it *possible*.....that his fear and therefore bad decisions are based on a distorted image of the landowner? That his lenses are a little skewed; the opposite of rose-colored glasses?

Could it be that the purpose behind this parable might *not* be about “investing wisely for fun and profit” at all, or even “use it or lose it with your time, talent and treasure” that we’re sometimes quick to assign as its meaning, but a much more *important* purpose—that it might be challenging us to rethink how we imagine God?

Theologian David Lose suggests that Matthew, in this parable, is giving us a **warning** that we’ve got a skewed perspective—even defective lenses. That how we think about God matters! How we imagine God wants to interact with us, and what we think God’s character is like needs re-examining.

And even more importantly, what we think God’s attitude *toward* us is, affects everything we do and how we view the world. Do we live and move with fear and trembling, or with courageous risk-taking?

David Lose prods us: “[I]f we imagine God primarily as stern, even angry, and given to dispensing a terrifying and harsh justice, we will likely come to believe that *everything* bad in our lives is *punishment* from God. Similarly, if we see God as arbitrary and capricious,

that’s what we experience, a fickle and unsympathetic God who meets our expectations.

“But if we view God primarily in terms of **grace**, one who empowers and entrusts and frees, then we will regularly be surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments of grace we experience all around us. For when we imagine God to be a God of **love**, we find it far easier to experience God’s love in our own lives and to share it with others.” (David Lose)

So, for starters, as we look at this parable with new eyes—which we should do with *every* parable and scripture teaching we encounter—what if we look with fresh eyes at our concept of God and God’s dealing with us?

Could God be that wealthy landowner who entrusts *us* with the riches of the kingdom, no matter how lowly and undeserving (untalented?) *we* might think we are? And, could those talents, those riches, be far more than we can ask or imagine?

If we have a distorted image of God—we need to change that. And then, change our idea of ourselves, through God’s eyes. We are the first two servants, wholly loved and trusted by the landowner, and empowered and encouraged to not only survive but thrive!

V. BE THE CHURCH OF?

Secondly, while we've got our "new eyes" on, might we look at our churches, our faith communities? Because our concept of God and God's relationship with us makes a huge difference in how we view ourselves in life and community.

Phillip Gulley, author of "If the Church Were Christian" (which different folks here have been reading), suggests that some churches fail to connect with people or keeps them coming for the wrong reasons, because of their lenses. Perhaps some churches are 1st and 2nd Entrusted Servant-types, and others are more like the 3rd Servant ilk.

Gulley points out how often religions and churches can focus on humans' shortcomings and need of salvation, forgiveness, confession—you name it!—to an extent that ceases to be healthy. And definitely ceases to be Good News!

He grew up in such a church and kept encountering them in far too many places. Too much guilt, too many instances of shame and a judgmental God. People left the worship service "emotionally and spiritually bruised."

Ron Erickson said it well last week in his message: that in our Christian tradition, an emphasis on Original Sin has *far* outweighed the biblical notion of Original Blessing in *many* times and places.

We may not even realize that this perspective is the predominant one at times. In addition to new lenses, we need discerning ears to listen for the prevalent message—how it God portrayed? Described? How are human beings portrayed in relation to God?

What is God's attitude toward us, God's followers and children? "Sinners in the hand of an angry God?" Or trusted friends, given the keys to the kingdom to invest, steward and multiply in abundance?

Gulley offers a picture of what "being the church" can look like instead—if the lenses are love and grace-tinted—both of God and ourselves:

"[When] church and Christians take seriously our human potential, they begin creating communities that affirm and encourage all people. They give careful thought to the hymns they sing, rewriting the lyrics to better reflect God's inclusive love. Their prayers embody God's concern for all people and the delight and gift of human life and potential.

"We could see ourselves and others as God does—beloved, accepted, valued, cherished, of infinite worth and potential. Churches would exist to help us comprehend and appreciate that reality, equipping and encouraging us to live freely, fully, and faithfully.

"Leaders would not be valued for their ability to further the institution, but for their capacity to create soul-nurturing communities. Shame, blame, and spiritual tyranny would be things of the past,

remnants of a fear-based religion whose precepts we have outgrown. No more life-diminishing churches.

“It is long past time for the flowering of a life-giving Christianity. A spirituality that more accurately reflects the values and priorities of Jesus.”

Life-affirming community. Is that us?

VI. AS YET UNREVEALED

Our **banner** we’ve used off and on these past months (thank you, Janet!) just *clinches* for me where life puts us at times, and where we are as a church right now.

We are in a *liminal* time—on the one hand we are grieving and honoring and missing those who are no longer with us. Yet, we are in a profound time too—as we are also exploring new horizons and catching glimpses of where God is leading us on this journey into new dimensions.

Who we are together as a beloved community feels in many ways, *yet to be revealed*. Just like the song, “Hymn of Promise”, says that this banner was inspired by:

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;

**In cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!**

**In the cold and snow of winter
there’s a spring that waits to be,
Unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.**

Unrevealed until its season.
The now and the not yet.

Who have we been in the centuries past that we *never* lose sight of—that we hold onto with our cloud of saints and bring into the now and the tomorrow? Who are we becoming as the Body of Christ in *this* time and place, on *this* season of our journey together in the Spirit?

I shared this sense of where we are as a community (both our congregation and our wider community of town and county) in the IGNITE gathering at La Foret last month. The leaders were capturing the messages folks in the group were sharing, and writing them on a flip chart. Later, I noticed that Tenneson, our leader, had written my message up there, but not quite gotten it “right.”

He’d written “**Unrevealed until it’s seasoned.**”

Hmmm....my first thought was: That’s wrong! He’s got the grammar wrong. My second thought (like a lightbulb!) was, “That’s *wonderful!*” It’s both/and! All of the above.

“Unrevealed until its season” AND “unrevealed until it is *seasoned.*”

Because things often *aren’t* revealed to us, or made clear on the path ahead, *until* a significant time of sitting with it, seasoning, percolating, gestating—pick your favorite metaphor!— can occur. With intention.

With a willingness to focus with new eyes and lenses, to listen deeply with discerning ears for what might be revealed. To invest our talents and gifts from God, even when we're not sure what the return will be.

But, we *still* trust that going out and reaching out and putting our faith into action—into life-giving and life-and-love-building is by far better than burying it—our heads included—in the sand; in the dirt— where nothing grows or thrives.

VII. TRUST AND INVEST

In this season—of Thanksgiving for God's many abundant blessings, we give thanks too, for what is yet to be revealed. "Give thanks for unknown blessings already on their way." (anon)

Let's stretch out to connect by stretching our concept of God. Open up to new, open, loving, supportive images. It's not easy to reshape our images of God. It may take a long time to grasp the Still-speaking, still seasoning, always/still-revealing God. Hopefully, it takes a lifetime!

But maybe for today, it is enough to begin. To see just a glimpse of God as our biggest cheerleader rather than our chief critic or unsatisfied parent.

That God is *not* some demanding boss, keeping a record, watching to see if we are "naughty or nice," but "The One in whom we live and move and have our being...."

Let's be like the first two slaves. USE our talents, our gifts our resources. Explore the possibilities, knowing we are entrusted with love itself! Trusted, held, supported by God – *not* suspected of ill, or chastised for cowering in the corner in fear.

As that greatest of theologians of the 20th century (well, at least a prophet!), Erma Bombeck says: "When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left, and could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'"

What is lying within *you*, as yet *unrevealed*? Give thanks for those gifts and that trust. Even if you don't know for sure, and don't see clearly YET.

This is not a call to "do more", but to reflect deeply on what is yet to be revealed. *Inside* you; springing forth, dancing forth out of US. As a beloved community. "This Good Day, it is a gift from you!"

What is yet unrevealed in us and among us? And, what is the seasoning we need on this journey? "Unrevealed until it is seasoned!" We will have to do some intentional seasoning if it's going to all become clear! We might need some rock salt on the slippery, icy road to give us traction. Or, a little sage on our stuffing and turkey!

But know, today, that: You. are. enough. Your gifts of heart and giving are plenty. "Give thanks with a grateful heart." Amen.