

# “Entrusted to Us”

## *A Valley Presbyterian Church Sermon*

November 16, 2008

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I Thessalonians 5:12-24

Matthew 25:14-29

Mark Twain once said “there are two kinds of people in the world: those who believe in two kinds of people and those who do not.”<sup>1</sup> The 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew seems to epitomize this distinction of two kinds of people. Last week, we talked about two kinds of bridesmaids – the wise and the foolish – awaiting the arrival of the groom who had the keys to the wedding banquet. Next week, we will look at the final section of this chapter, when the good shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; dividing them according to their acts of compassion, mercy and love.

This week, we consider the Parable of the Talents. The ironic part of this story is that in Jesus’ time, a talent was not some God-given gift, it was money – a lot of money, in fact. But the word “talent” actually traces its origins to this famous story because, in it, three servants received these fortunes from their master as a gift – not something earned. Two of the servants took what they had received and turned it into something more, but the other took what he was given and buried it in the ground. Nothing lost, but nothing gained either.

Two kinds of servants. The latter’s actions are ruled by fear of failure, while the first two were willing to risk changing what they had been given; allowing it to grow into more than they had received. After growing the gift – even to double its original size – it was all given back to the master, with a promise that because they had performed well in small things, they would later receive great things. Thus, a cycle of giving and receiving has been established – gifts entrusted to each according to their abilities, gifts returned to each according to their faithful stewardship.

So, how big were these talents given to the servants – five to one, two to another, and one to the third? In Jesus’ day, a talent was equal to 15 years’ worth of wages for the average worker – the equivalent of several thousand paychecks – that was one talent. In some cases, a talent could be calculated in property – as thousands of acres – but usually it was measured with the most valuable currency of the day – which was then, as it still is now, gold. One talent would be valued at about 75 pounds of gold. It represented an amazing sum – something that many people would literally not even be able to lift, much less multiply. What could it mean that these servants were entrusted with so much?

When we look through the gospels, we discover that Jesus’ stories are full of extravagant sums. We watch as Jesus’ friend Mary pours a \$20,000 bottle of perfume to anoint her Lord. We hear about a slave who owes his king a debt of 10,000 talents; equivalent to – at least before recent years – the entire national debt of the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted by Jack Haberer in *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Nov. 10, 2008

What kind of master would entrust the kind of money Jesus is talking about to his slaves? God is the kind of master who does such extravagant things and Jesus is the one who is going away, placing his greatest treasure in the hands of his followers. Jesus goes away but will come again. He entrusts the extravagance of the gospel to us, and promises that it is bound to increase. He says it is like a tiny mustard seed growing to a huge shrub. It is like seed scattered, yielding a hundred fold. This morning's story is tame by comparison. The amount only doubles. The promise is that the gospel entrusted to our hands will produce an increase as we tell others the story and live it out, as we display it like a lamp set on a lamp-stand, like salt which preserves the neighborhood food-stock, or like leaven which can infuse compassion into the world.<sup>2</sup>

So, a talent isn't a talent at all, it's a pile of money. You may have heard about one of the many churches that have chosen to entrust some of their "talent" into the hands of their members. They are following the suggestion set forth in a little book called "The Kingdom Assignment," the story of pastor Denny Bellesi, who doled out \$10,000 in \$100 increments to church members one Sunday, with three requirements: 1) The \$100 that you are given belongs to God. 2) You must invest that \$100 in God's work. 3) Report your results in 90 days. After three months, the reports were startling: the people had made money hand over fist and contributed it to the Bellesi's church; and as a result, creative ministries were hatched, lives were transformed, people wept for joy -- and it was all covered by NBC's Dateline.<sup>3</sup>

I once took part in one of these programs with another church. Only, I didn't give out the money – the treasurer of the church did. And, we didn't hand out \$100 to each member, instead it was twenty. And we didn't have 100 members to participate, there weren't that many in the church. But, the results were about the same. No, the national news did not come to cover the story, but there were some very creative ideas. Some people made a lot of money – relatively at least – two, five, or even ten times the original investment.

As pastor of the church, I considered my involvement in this project somewhat precarious. I couldn't exactly refuse the \$20, so I chose to participate. I thought about simply burying the money in my wallet, but a part of me wanted to be included in the group to earn the words: "well done, good and faithful servant." So, here's what I did – I took the tomatoes and peppers I had grown in my garden; I bought some cilantro, garlic, plastic containers and a few secret ingredients and made several batches of salsa to sell. I made a little money – made a few noses run and tears well up in the buyers' eyes – but only a little money. I ended up almost doubling my investment; oops, not my investment, but God's investment in the church made through me.

Recently, someone from this church asked me, "why don't we do this"? I had to think about that for a while. I had to go back and remember what my feelings were when I participated in it. And, I remembered wondering how un-extravagant it felt to watch as the careful distribution of the same \$20 bill to each member took place. It felt nothing

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Modahl, "From Wrath to Grace"

<sup>3</sup> James Howell, "Trojan Horse"

like the master passing out one and two and five talents: huge gifts, each worth a fortune and each entrusted to the servant according to their ability. Why, then, should the church give somebody \$20, or even \$100, and say to them, "this belongs to God," thus implying that everything else they have – whether that is one dollar or a million dollars – rightfully belongs to someone other than God?

Some people are more talented than others, and this is a gift, not an achievement. LeBron James, Yo Yo Ma, Warren Buffet, Julia Roberts Albert Einstein, these people have been given a variety of talents, but they are all extremely talented. Jesus seems to acknowledge in this parable that not all of us are born equal when it comes to gifts and talents. Some are given more, and from them, more is expected.

But, let's not forget, the servant in the parable who developed the five talents and the one who developed the two talents were absolutely equal in the eyes of the master! Both of them took what they were given and worked to make it grow. Both are praised for their faithful service; both are invited to enter into the master's joy. The difference between these two servants and the third one was not the number of talents or a different reward for using those talents. The only difference is in how responsible they were in using the talents they had been given; their willingness to risk that which had been placed into their trust.

The Greek word for "entrust" is sometimes translated "give over" or "hand over," which is the same word the gospel writers used for what Judas did to Jesus in "handing him over" to those who arrested him – only a few short days after Jesus tells this parable to his disciples.<sup>4</sup> The talent that Jesus gives to his disciples is not a pile of money, and it's not a great jump shot, it is the only gift which cannot be measured – it is the good news of the gospel; that God loves us and wants us to be loved, to live whole and complete lives.

"To each according to her ability." You may notice that I cut out the last line of the story – verse 30 – the one about being cast into the darkness, about the weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is one of Matthew's famous lines – and it scares a lot of people. So why would I cut it out; because I'm scared? That's not the reason. To me, reading this verse to you – the disciples of Christ – would be like giving you \$20, or even \$100, and telling you that is all that God has for you. God has entrusted you with much more, and you – as Christ's disciples – have done much more than bury it in the ground. Have you made mistakes? Me, too. Have you, at times, been afraid to share the good news of God's love; thinking it will make you look foolish or dogmatic or pushy? Been there.

But, God knows. God knows the level of your ability and expects from you only what you can do. God wants you to love and to be loved. God wants you to know the joy of giving – and the joy of receiving – and the joy of giving back again. For us to enter into the master's joy doesn't mean we have to go anywhere; it doesn't mean we have to wait for some time yet to come. It just means that we recognize we all have talents: not the money kind, not the special ability kind, but the kind that gives and

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Steagold, *Blogging Toward Sunday*, Nov. 11, 2008

nurtures and preserves life. The kind of talent which cannot be hidden under a bushel; the kind that acts like leaven whenever it touches the dough; the kind of talent that leads us to sacrifice those other kinds of talents because we know that it comes from God; and connects us with God; and brings others to God.

“Well done, good and trustworthy servant.” Well done, good and faithful parents. Well done, good and honest laborers. Well done, good and caring teachers. Well done, good and loving caregivers. Enter into the joy. It is for you. AMEN.