

FIRST LESSON: Zephaniah 1: 12-18
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 25: 14-30
November 15, 2020

“Action Matters”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Jesus’ parables were far more complex than we realize. There are layers upon layers—elements that jar us and don’t fit—things that force us to think. And the parable of the talents, while appearing straightforward to us, is anything but.

When we hear the word talent, we think of a special ability or skill. Someone has musical talent or artistic talent. But that’s because this word was imported into the English language from this parable. A talent in the original context of the parable had nothing to do with that. It was a measure of weight that in time became a specific amount of money, and it was A LOT of money, roughly 6000 denarii. If you’ve been paying attention, you’ll remember that one denarius was the average daily pay of a laborer. One talent was worth about twenty years of work. Five talents, the largest amount named in this parable, is comparable to one hundred years’ worth of labor, an absolutely astronomical amount!

All of this being established, let’s look at the historical context as if these were real people. If these were real people the wealthy man going on a journey would NOT have been a nice person. He would have been a member of one of the top 1% in society who had enormous wealth, and who got that wealth through unscrupulous means. Only the extremely wealthy—the aristocracy and priestly castes, traded like this man did. And here is where our assumptions about the morality of making money and the assumptions of Jesus’ day and culture directly clash, because making a profit back then was deemed **immoral**. Yes, that’s right, you heard me, immoral. Why? Because the ancient world viewed everything in limited and finite terms. Imagine it as a pie. If I take a huge slice of the pie, that means that someone else will be left with a tiny sliver. I am basically robbing another person. While it was acceptable to get rich through hard work as a farmer because God is the one who sent rain and sun and made animals fertile, trade was suspect, because all traders bought low and sold higher. It was a dishonorable thing to do, a form of theft. Of course, that did not stop people from doing it. They just got someone else to do it for them.

There were three common ways to use capital in the 1st century to make a profit from investments. The first was to back people involved in buying and selling goods. I front the money to Joe to take his group of camels to Egypt and bring back goods to sell. Joe then pays me back, plus a share of the profits. Or I take the risk of possible shipwreck and buy and sell that way. A second popular option was to back those involved in the currency exchange in the Temple—the same currency exchange that Jesus upended when he cleansed

the Temple. This was a lucrative business, because the currency exchangers always attached fees and fiddled around with the exchange rate. Someone who invested in a currency exchange business could make a lot of money. A third way to make money through investments was mortgage loans or bridge loans to small farmers or businesspeople. The interest rates on these loans were large—anywhere from 25% to 50%. The fact that this was contrary to scripture is obvious. It was basically impossible to ever pay these loans off, and often resulted in the properties being foreclosed on. The rich man then had the people who once owned their own land as tenants on his land. Or in the case of a widow with no one to work the land—the family were cast out into the street. Another cheat used by these ultra rich was to transfer their money into the Temple during the Jubilee year so they would not have to cancel the debt and give the land back. They also dodged Roman taxes this way! Tax shelters are not a new thing.

And here's where we come to our story, because it was common practice for wealthy lenders like these to give the dirty jobs of originating loans, collecting on them, and repossessing properties, to their servants. Quite apart from the fact that they were violating Jewish law six ways from Sunday, trade was socially dishonorable, so the aristocrat just got one of his underlings to do it for him. This also provided a layer of plausible deniability should things get nasty and public.

In this story, servants one and two clearly went along with the system. Even the words Jesus used were the technical words of the day. The first put his money into trading (*ergázomai*) probably commodities, buying at one price and selling at a higher price, and the second used interest-bearing investments (*kerdaino*)—either the loans or the currency-exchange business. Both made out like bandits, doubling their investment.

Anyone listening to this parable would have known all of this. **These were not good people.** This was not a story about noble capitalism. Americans hear this story and get it completely wrong because our cultural assumptions are so different! These were nasty people. And it is the third servant who should have been the hero. He refused to lend money at interest. The Torah (Exodus 22: 20-30) forbids the practice. He refused to take part in a system that would render people homeless. He accused the wealthy master of being a “*sklēros*,” which is a real insult. A *sklēros* is a hard and ruthless person, rough and possibly even violent. He goes on to accuse his own master of not actually earning any of his wealth by honest means. He contributes nothing positive to society. He makes a profit off the misery of others. And so, this servant refuses to participate and buries the money, which was a perfectly acceptable practice. He could not be faulted for doing this. And for his trouble the master reams him out for not at least putting the money in the bank so it could earn interest, takes the money away from him, gives it to the others and says, “For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. Throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

So what are we not seeing here? Jesus' audience would have been horrified by this story. On a superficial level it looks like God is an awful being who rewards corruption and condemns the faithful!

Jesus seems to be using a story about bad people to make a point about human nature, quite aside from morality. He does that in another parable too, commending a dishonest steward for being shrewd. So what if we look at this another way?

The master in this story increased his wealth. What if the "wealth" were lives saved? Imagine, that the talents are the skill we have for reaching others for the kingdom of God. Some people are natural evangelists. They are extraverts who will talk to anyone, and they have compassionate hearts. Some might even be called to preach or serve on the mission field. They are committed to sharing about Jesus with their lives and their words, and as a result many people come to faith. They just expanded the kingdom of God five talents worth. Others have a bit less skill but their heart is in the right place. They help their neighbors. They serve in their church. They volunteer and reach out to those in need. They increase the kingdom of God two talents worth. Both are told, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" The two-talent servant isn't treated as less worthy than the five-talent servant. Both were faithful with what they had. But then there is another servant, one who doesn't trust the master and is not committed to serving the master's interests. This third servant does not see any need to increase the kingdom of God. And so this third servant does not use any of his gifts. It is impossible to even tell that this servant is a Christian. His Christianity is buried in the ground. He behaves no differently from anyone else. And as a result the kingdom of God does not grow at all. It does not even grow in his own heart. Instead, it dies.

I do not have any proof that my interpretation is the correct one. This is a parable. It is designed to make us think. But we do know that Jesus was not in favor of evicting widows and exploiting the poor. We do know **for sure** what Jesus thought of the Temple money exchange business, because he showed us in very visible action. This is not a prosperity gospel endorsement. It is a story that tells us that when it comes to our faith, action matters. I can plant a seed in the ground, but if it does not change and grow, it is just a dead seed. When we have faith planted in us, we have to do something with it. Jesus tells us in still another parable that we are not to hide our light under a bushel.

The western church of which we are a part has tended to interpret this parable to mean that we should use our gifts, natural and spiritual, for the kingdom of God and not bury them. This may be accurate, but we need to beware of those who take it one step farther as an endorsement of an entire economic system, because it is definitely not that. Jesus opposes all forms of exploitation.

But on this Stewardship Sunday we are reminded of the fact that God has given us all resources and asks us to use them for the kingdom of God. We are one family, one community of faith. And of course, there are bills to pay. PECO comes to us all! The building needs repairs. Salaries have to be paid. Our

significant financial contributions are all needed. But so are our personal contributions of love, and prayer and support. We all have different gifts. Some may have five talents and others two, but we are all called by God to use them to bring blessing and healing into our broken world. As we take this time to rededicate our giving to God for the year ahead, let us also rededicate our whole lives to serve God wherever we are with all that we are. Amen

Zephaniah 1: 12-18

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps
and punish those who are complacent,
who are like wine left on its dregs,
who think, 'The Lord will do nothing,
either good or bad.'

13 Their wealth will be plundered,
their houses demolished.

Though they build houses,
they will not live in them;
though they plant vineyards,
they will not drink the wine."

14 The great day of the Lord is near—
near and coming quickly.

The cry on the day of the Lord is bitter;
the Mighty Warrior shouts his battle cry.

15 That day will be a day of wrath—
a day of distress and anguish,
a day of trouble and ruin,
a day of darkness and gloom,
a day of clouds and blackness—

16 a day of trumpet and battle cry
against the fortified cities
and against the corner towers.

Matthew 25: 14-30

14 "Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. **15** To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag,^[a] each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. **16** The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. **17** So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. **18** But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

19 "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. **20** The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.'

21 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

22 “The man with two bags of gold also came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.’

23 “His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’

24 “Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. **25** So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’

26 “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? **27** Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest.

28 ““So take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. **29** For whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. **30** And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’