

“Steward”
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November 15, 2020

The holy gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew, the 25th chapter:

“Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one, he gave five talents of money, to another, two talents, and to another, one talent, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received five talents went out once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground, and hid his master's money.

“After a long time, the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five talents brought the other five. ‘Master,’ he said, ‘you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.’

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

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

“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!’

“Then the man who had received one talent 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. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See here is what belongs to you.’

“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? 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.’

“Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

This is the gospel of the Lord.

I love Matthew. I fell in love with Jesus reading Matthew. Yeah, on my 13th birthday. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You this day and we ask You to help us to recognize the gifts You have given us that we might use them to Your honor and glory, strengthen our faith and our faithfulness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson today does not use the word *steward*, but rather *servant*. As a Christian, I'm surprised that we are actually often more comfortable with the notion of being servants than we are with the idea of being stewards. My wife Marilyn has worked in the travel industry now for many years. It's interesting that we shifted the language that we use. We no longer refer to the person who serves and takes care of us on airplanes as a stewardess. We now refer to that person as a flight attendant. It's amazing how the connotation of language changes over time. Steward, stewardess, and stewardship are not bad words. Instead, they're words intended to communicate someone who's put in charge of someone to care for them, to put in the care of another. It is, in fact, an honor to be put in this position of responsibility. Steward is a good word.

Today in the gospel, we have heard the parable of the talents. In biblical times, a talent was a unit of weight equal to about 75 pounds and in the New Testament, it was a unit of monetary reckoning, though not in the form of an actual coin. What I thought was provoking to me, what I thought was surprising is the actual value of a talent. A talent has a value of approximately 20 years' wages for a laborer. A common laborer earned about one Denarius a day. So to talk in modern equivalents, if we think that a laborer earns about \$15 an hour, that laborer would earn about \$30,000 per year. A talent, in that equivalence, would be worth \$600,000, as it's noted in the ESV Study Bible. So one talent \$600,000, two talents \$1.2 million, and five talents \$3 million, in today's money. That's a lot of wealth for this person to put into the hands of his servants to manage in our Gospel lesson today.

One of the things that happens as we read is that we often find ourselves identifying with someone in the story. So with whom do you identify in this parable? Is it the man with the servants who gives his wealth to them for them to manage? Or is it one of the servants? Do you think of yourself as the five talent servant, or the two talent servant, or the one talent servant? Let me suggest to you that, even if you think of yourself as the one talent servant, that in this story, even the one talent servant is entrusted with a significant wealth. Twenty years' worth of wages. That's a heavy responsibility and it's a heavy responsibility that we also share. So when we hear the word stewardship, and sometimes we don't respond particularly well when we understand that we're at the time of stewardship in the church year. Let me suggest that we put that idea in check.

To be a steward is an honor and a privilege and while this is indeed a time when the church is addressing the idea of what you will make in the form of financial contributions to our operating budget and our other plans for the coming year. It can and should be so much more. It's a time when we look at the amazing gifts that God has provided to us, that He's poured out into our lives, and to realize that even if we are a one talent

servant, God has richly and generously entrusted to us more than we ever thought He would. And so this is the time for prayer, a time for discernment. We want to begin with a prayer that maybe sounds something along this line. "God, what are You thinking!?" or perhaps maybe a little better, "Lord, what are You thinking that I might do in service for You? What are Your thoughts and what is Your will for me as I seek to use what You've given me to serve this world in Your name."

Like the servants in the parable, we have to figure out what it is we will do with what God has entrusted to us. It is my hope and I think it's probably your hope too that God will be pleased with the service we do in His name. Some of us struggle with compliments. I know that I often do, and yet, even so, we desire to be thought of and, in fact, to be people who can be trusted, who will do a good job with the tasks we are given. Honestly, at the end of the day, I think we would all love to hear the words "well done." As a matter of fact, as I'm finding those words so frequently on my lips in the last month or so that I've been here at Saint Timothy's, so often I look at the work that has been done around this place and the first thing that comes to my mind is *well done*. It's just impressive what God's people do in this place in service to His kingdom. Well done. And I certainly hope and pray that those will be God's words to us as well. Well done, good and faithful servant.

We want God to be pleased with what we do on His behalf with the gifts He has provided to us, but that's not where it ends. Enter into the joy of your Master. Enter into the joy of the Lord is what Jesus says in the Gospel reading today. That we have the opportunity not only for God to say "well done," but actually to be invited into His happiness, invited into His kingdom. We are not called to be servants who just work to prepare things, and then put it out there for someone else to enjoy, and then wait in the back room until the party's over, so we can clean up. We are invited to enter into the very celebration of the goodness of God and His work in the world. We're welcomed to the party. We're invited to enjoy the very things that God is calling us to do for others and that is an amazing blessing.

So often I've heard in the church this thing that we do referred to as sacrifice and that's appropriate. Jesus sacrificed His life for us. We're called to make sacrifices on behalf of others. But I will tell you that very often in this life, I have found that those things that might at first glance seem like a sacrifice are, in fact, an amazing joy. So often when I give of myself to help another, I feel like what I receive in return is much more than I ever gave. That's what I hear over and over from people who are in service to others. What they received back is more than they give. We're invited to be instrumental in the good that God is doing. Amen. Hallelujah.

And so what contribution have you been blessed to make? What is your part in the kingdom-building operation that God is doing in our world today? Listen to these words from the message from 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7. This is what The Message says:

God's various gifts are handed out everywhere; but they all originate in God's spirit. God's various ministries are carried out everywhere; but they all originate

in God's spirit. God's various expressions of power are in action everywhere; but God himself is behind it all.

and then these words:

Each person is given something to do that shows who God is; everyone gets in on it, everyone benefits.

You have been gifted by God in your own unique way and therefore, the contribution you make to the ministry and service of God, to the blessing of the rest of the community is yours alone uniquely. But you're not asked to do it alone. Each of us should use whatever gift we have received as faithful stewards of God's grace. Remember that it is not your gift alone that does this work but rather, your gift combined with my gift, combined with the gifts of our other brothers and sisters in Christ, that is, *together*, we make a difference for God in this world. We are not all gifted the same and we should all not be asked to make the same contribution to the work of God in His kingdom, but rather, we are gifted individually and so that is that works together. God's grace works in a synergistic way, so that what we offer and what they offer is more than the sum of its parts, as God is able to accomplish abundantly far beyond all that we ask or imagine.

We live in a particular time and in a particular place, and the truth is some of what we're experiencing now seems completely unique, or at least, it is certainly new to us. Often, we're not sure what to make of this time in which we live, but I assure you, that the particular time and date of today and of this moment in the history of Saint Timothy's is still a part of God's greater Kairos time, a time when God shows up and makes a difference. We are promised the very presence of God abiding in us and making Himself known through us for such a time as this. Now is our opportunity to assess what God has provided and to prayerfully think about what God is calling us to, so that together we invest in God's kingdom as it comes on Earth, as it is in heaven, even at this very time. What is this season or era in which we live and serve? I don't know. How might we contribute to what our world will become? I'm not sure of that either, but I know that what really is what we are working toward is the kingdom of God that *will* come. That's His promise and you and I get to become a part of it.

So what we do now in this meantime is to recognize that we have a gift to use. We have a calling to answer. We have a Master to serve and a world to bless. In the meantime, we are privileged to be stewards of the generous blessing of our God. Thanks be to God! Amen.