

Judges 4:1-7
Matthew 25:14-30

24th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
November 15, 2020

Buried Treasure

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson today from the book of Judges provides the story of a female leader of ancient Israel—she being a prophetess and a judge. The Canaanites had oppressed Israel for twenty years, with 900 mighty chariots. But that oppression was about to end under the leadership of Deborah. Listen to these words from Judges 4:1-7...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

Our Gospel Lesson from Matthew 25 is the third of three parables that Matthew presents on the necessity of faithfulness, preparedness, and risk, with reference to the coming again of Jesus. Speculation about when this glorious return would happen is discouraged.

But about that day and hour no one knows... (24:36a)

In the meantime, faithful discipleship calls for the taking of risks and leaps of faith. Listen to these words from Matthew 25:14-30...

Sermon

The parables of Jesus in Matthew 24 and 25 are provided to help his hearers direct their attention to the issues at hand. First, on *faithfulness*, is the Parable of the Servant Left in Charge. Second, on *preparedness*, the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids. And third, on *risk*, is our Parable of the Talents. Yes, it matters what we do with what we have. God's trust in us is neither trivial nor incidental. We have choices, with consequences for the way we use what we have been given.

Usually when you hear a sermon on The Parable of the Talents, the point is that we all have certain God-given talents and even the one-talent person has a responsibility to be a good steward of that gift. But there's more here than a moral lesson like "Use it or lose it."

The term "talent" first referred to a certain weight of iron, and then to specific coinage. This term has been taken and mixed up with a word for natural gifts or abilities. A biblical talent is a weight—about 34 kilograms. By New Testament times, like the British pound, the weight had come to refer to a specific measurement of money. It was the equivalent of 6,000 denarii. This would have equaled the earnings of a day laborer for 15 years—a treasure by any accounts. And this is what the one-talent man buried.

Now the first servant receives five times as much as the third, and the second servant twice as much as the third. These first two servants went to work and traded with the money given to them. They managed to double the amount, and were given even more responsibility. But the third buried his money in the ground, which was viewed as a safe and common thing to do in that time.

So what is this third servant's problem? He's not a dishonest rogue out to swindle his master of whatever he can get. There is no hint of fraud, deceit, or scandal. He doesn't go off like the Prodigal Son and waste his money and himself in riotous ways in the far country. So what is wrong with being careful and cautious? The problem is that his virtues have become vices. Prudence and wariness have become self-protectiveness and restraint. Inhibition has turned into fear.

Perhaps the real problem here is the *relationship* of the third servant to his master. His view of the master is revealed in two verses from our lesson:

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."
(25:24-25)

Has servant number three created an image of the master that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy? We do that, you know. If this servant had only done his best, the master would have been satisfied. If he had really trusted his master, he could have allowed himself to take a chance.

Tom Watson, the former head of IBM, once said, “To increase your success rate you have to double your failure rate.” But great success rarely happens without risk. And it’s hard to take risks without trust.

To be sure, the parable before us today is clearly one of the trickier ones. As the Rev. Philip Fenton says, if we try to equate everything about the master with God, there’s a problem. Reaping what is not his does not sound like the God we know in Jesus Christ, but more representative of the behavior of the aristocracy with whom the common people struggled.

But it was not unusual for Jesus to use figures of less than admirable qualities to provide lessons in other parables. For example, there’s the dishonest steward of Luke 16 and the unjust judge of Luke 18.

So we just need to not make too much of the “God connection” in this parable. The master here is not the main focus, but rather the servant who wastes his opportunity to use the treasure entrusted to his care. He hides his light under a basket rather than let it shine from a lamp stand and enable others to see his good works and give glory to God. (Mt. 5:15-16)

And the reason the third servant buries this treasure? It was not because his talent was so small that it would make no difference. It was not because he resented having only one talent. It was not because of greed. In a word, his problem was *fear*. Fear of failure, fear of punishment, fear of loss. But Paul said in his Second Letter to Timothy:

God did not give us a spirit of fear but of power and of love and of a sound mind. (1:7)

You know, it might be a good idea if the Session adopted a No-Fear policy for members and friends of Midway. Because every one of you have been given gifts to use in the work of the church. And being afraid to use your gifts is not good for you or for the church.

Yes, the one-talent man was *afraid* to use his gift. He saw a harsh master, who would not tolerate any mistakes. So he buried his gift. While others in the New Testament saw the Master as having high expectations, they did not see him as harsh. They knew him as one who was slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. They knew him as one who paid a full day's wage even to those who worked but an hour. They knew him as the Good Shepherd who would leave ninety-nine sheep behind and go out searching for a single, lost lamb. They knew him as the Waiting Father who would welcome home his wayward son with robe, ring, sandals, and party. They knew when they scattered seed, some would fall on hard ground, some would fall in rocky places, others among thorns. But they also knew that some of the scattered seed would fall on good soil, grow and produce a harvest, maybe a hundred times more than what was sown. They saw the world filled with grace and second chances and they risked their gifts with the certainty that one day, regardless of the outcome of their investment, they would hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master." (Mt. 25:23)

Members and friends of the church at Midway, our God is extravagant, investing lavishly in us, his people. Our God is like a sower who throws seed everywhere. And our job is to take what is given to us, and use it to the glory of God in the work of his kingdom.

That word *work* is used advisedly. Notice that the master said that the third servant was wicked and lazy. There's some debate as to how the Greek word *ὀκνηρό* (*oak nay RAY'*) in verse 26 is to be interpreted here—some say *timid*, but most English translations say *lazy*. No doubt both are legitimate. For now, I want to focus on *lazy*. One of the seven deadly sins was the sin of sloth. Proverbs 24:30-34 declares:

I passed by the field of a sluggard,
 by the vineyard of a man without sense;
 and lo, it was all overgrown with thorns;
 the ground was covered with nettles,
 and its stone wall was broken down.
 Then I saw and considered it;
 I looked and received instruction.
 A little sleep, a little slumber,
 a little folding of the hands to rest,
 and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
 and want, like an armed man.

The truth is, in order to be the church, we can't be timid or lazy. In carrying out the ministry and mission of Christ, there is work. And it is not always easy, but it can be joyful, as was our recent Yard Sale. We have the treasure of Christ's ministry and gospel entrusted to us.

As we look to the end of this year and the beginning of a new year, what are the gifts that you could put to use in the church? Serving on a committee? Singing in the choir? Increasing your financial support of the church? And beyond, delivering Meals on Wheels or volunteering at a local charity?

Jesus said:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

If we abide in Jesus—that is, make our home in him day by day—there is the assurance that we will bear much fruit.

Finally, in our Old Testament lesson from Judges we find the story of a woman leader of ancient Israel. Some 200 years after the Exodus, Deborah challenged and inspired Barak to lead Israel in battle against the Canaanites. Victory was won and forty years of peace followed. It was unusual in that period for a position of leadership to be taken by a woman, but not unheard of. We know of Miriam, the sister of Moses, and Huldah in 2 Kings. And there may have been others. But Deborah was arguably the most imminent of all. Her gifts must have been many and

great. She is called a prophetess, indicating insight and perspective. She possessed a sensitivity which alerted her to the movements of God's spirit. As a judge under a palm tree, she weighed disputes brought to her and gave her decisions. And now Deborah will lead the Israelites back to God, as they cry out in their Canaanite oppression—the consequences of their idolatry.

Likewise, we have women in leadership positions here at Midway. (What would we do without them?) We have men and women ready to carry out the purpose of the church, which Richard Niebuhr sums up as “the increase of the love of God and neighbor.”

So, let us use our gifts and not be afraid of striking out. Let us proclaim the gospel of Christ in word and deed. Know that those who put to use what God gives, discover a Lord ready and willing to put them in charge of even more. A Lord ready to share the joy of his presence and his blessing in carrying out his mission. Pray for and support your leaders. Abide in Christ, the true vine, and you will bear much fruit.

Amen and Amen.