

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
November 13, 2011
Matthew 25:14-30
"Well Done"
Pastor John Guthrie



Calvin deals with consequences all the time, because he is earning consequences all the time. Somehow he never seems to learn, because he keeps doing the things that earn the consequences, anyway.

If you have been with us over the last several weeks you may be able to see how today's rather unsettling parable fits into the general theme of this long speech that Jesus makes in chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew's gospel. The entire speech is oriented towards what it means to be ready for him when he returns after being resurrected, but because Jesus speaks in parables nearly the whole time, he never comes out and directly says that's what he's talking about. But it becomes pretty clear by the end of chapter 25.

You may remember that in chapter 24 Jesus tells his disciples, in a sense, what the end times will be like. Not in any great detail, but with imagery and metaphor. He tells a story about slaves who must be at work while their master is away, very closely related to today's story. If the slaves in the first parable, at the end of chapter 24, are misbehaving they will be cut in pieces, placed with the hypocrites, and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then there is the second story about the five wise bridesmaids and the five foolish bridesmaids, which we considered last week. Then there is this story about the three slaves who are each given a certain number of talents to do with as they see fit, while their master is away.

Very quickly, let's assign identities to the various characters and outline the plot, at least according to the way most readers understand the parable. The master is Jesus, who leaves on a long journey: that would be the time between his resurrection and his return at the end of the age. The slaves are followers of Jesus, including you and me.

There is some ambiguity in exactly what the talents are. We do know that in Jesus' time a talent was a huge sum of money, equal to something like fifteen years of income for a common laborer. It is tempting on this Stewardship Dedication Sunday to treat the talents as if they

represent only money. The talents do represent money, but they represent much more as well. It is true that financial resources are placed in our hands, and that we are commissioned to be faithful stewards of those resources, because they are not ours: they belong to our Master. Furthermore, the slaves are called to account for the funds that were placed in their hands before the Master left. So it is that you and I are called to be faithful stewards of financial resources that are not ours, as well.

But it is very clear that the talents represent much more than simply money. Many readers believe they are the various gifts and abilities and yes, talents, that we have been given by God. Another intriguing interpretation of the talents is that they are actually the gospel, the good news, of Jesus Christ, which we are given and must care for and spread responsibly. But at least for today I would like to stick with the first interpretation and see if we together can make a little more sense of the parable.

The first two slaves receive five and two talents, respectively, and by wise and shrewd investment manage to double their master's money by the time he returns. The master is greatly pleased with their performance: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave: you have been trustworthy in a few things. I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your master."

The third slave, however, buries his single talent in the ground, fearing the wrath of his master. When the master returns he is furious with the third slave: "You wicked and lazy slave! You ought to have invested my money. Take the talent from him and give it to the one with the ten talents. Those who have will receive more, but from those who have nothing even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness where there will be – you guessed it – weeping and gnashing of teeth.

That seems more than a bit harsh. After all, the slave did return the talent: he lost none of it. He could have done a lot worse, and that's precisely why he hid his one talent: he was afraid of losing it if he invested it or risked it in any way.

And I think there is the real lesson from this parable, in spite of the bits of it that make us uneasy. The first two slaves are willing to take a risk. They are willing even to risk what is not theirs in order to please their master. The third slave plays it safe. He takes no risk. He puts nothing on the line.

One way of interpreting this somewhat difficult parable is to think of it as Christ's call for us to take risks, to do things outside our zones of comfort, to do things that entail a possibility of loss. All for the kingdom of heaven, which is such a central theme in Matthew's gospel. Recall that Jesus refers directly to the kingdom of heaven at the beginning of the previous parable, about the wise and foolish bridesmaids. This parable of the talents is a kingdom parable, too.

So yes, you and I are given talents, skills, gifts, abilities which can be used to build the kingdom until the Master returns. But we can also choose to figuratively bury them in the ground. We can believe that our particular talents are not as good as those of others, and therefore fail to use them. We can believe that we don't have the time to invest our talents for the kingdom. We can believe that the kingdom will advance just fine, thank you, without the investment of our talents, skills, and abilities. But that's like burying our talent in the ground. It's like hiding our light under a bushel basket: Matthew chapter 5.

Yes, the parable calls us to give generously and lavishly of our financial resources. But even more deeply, it calls us to invest our talents and abilities recklessly, faithfully building up the kingdom of heaven along with others, until our Master returns. Failure to risk, to care, to put our lives on the line has, according to the parable, dire consequences: the scorn of the Master, loss of our talent, outer darkness, weeping and gnashing of teeth.

We're not supposed to be playing it safe. We're supposed to be taking risks. We're supposed to be doing crazy things for the sake of the Master and the Master's kingdom. So that we can hear the Master's voice one day: "Well done, good and faithful slave."