

## Giving and Gratitude

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

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Whenever a Biblical story ends with one person or group excluded, especially with today's third slave being thrown into "*the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*" my critical eye goes into overdrive. These images and phrases run counter to a God of steadfast love, a God of infinite second chances, and a God of more mercy and grace and forgiveness than any of could ever truly deserve.

So, one might wonder, what gives?

First of all, it is always important and helpful to learn more about what was actually going on in the context of the time of these stories. Biblical commentaries tell us that the original Greek word that has been translated as "*talent*" was actually a huge amount of money – about fifteen years of income for a common worker. The first person, then, would have received more than a lifetime's wages.

When this is pointed out I can't help but think of the frequency of someone winning a great amount of money in a lottery somewhere (and for whatever reason, this qualifies as news) and how they so often spend it on lavish things that the media assumes make the rest of us envious. This week, however, a woman won \$50,000 on a television game show and she promptly gave \$10,000 of it to her local food bank. A news reporter was asking random people on the street about this, and just how selfish our society has become was sadly revealed.

The first people who would have heard Jesus share this parable were also probably surprised to have to imagine God's reign or kingdom as money at work. Then, as well as now, money was often used as a tool of exclusion or oppression. And in the ancient world it was not associated with God's work or activity.

Today, I get stuck before the story unfolds simply with the use of the word "*slaves*." On a surface reading there might be an injustice even before we begin.

And in this parable there was surely a system in place that was hierarchical and ruthless. Those who had large sums of money would use it to make loans to common farmers for them to plant their crops, and make a great profit while the common workers would do well to break even. It would not have been unlike the practice of sharecropping in this country after the Civil War and lingering on even today.

In most stewardship sermons on this parable (and like the story from our church school curriculum for our children's time today) it is emphasized how the third worker was scared or lazy or foolish. But I am struck that we rarely acknowledge that this person had the courage to speak truth to power. "*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.” That doesn’t feel lazy or scared to me. Rather, it feels honest and even courageous.

There is another interesting perspective on this parable in the book Parables as Subversive Speech, by William Herzog. He writes through a prism of liberation theology – of reading it through the eyes of the oppressed. He writes:

*The hero of the parable is the third servant. By digging a hole and burying the aristocrat’s talent in the ground, he has taken it out of circulation. It cannot be used to dispossess more peasants from their lands through its dispersion in the form of usurious loans. By his actions, the third retainer dissociates himself from the system he has so cleverly exploited to attain his position of power and influence. No motivation is given or needs to be; a figure is known by his actions, not by his internal ruminations. When the hero speaks, he utters in the full light of day what he has learned in the dark; he reveals what has been covered beneath the public rhetoric of praise and promise, made known what has been hidden beneath the mystifications of the elites, proclaims clearly what has only been whispered among the elites and their retainers. The whistle-blower is no fool. He realizes that he will pay a price, but he has decided to accept the cost rather than continue to pursue his exploitive path.*

So, in this assessment, the three slaves or servants are seen as “retainers” – or persons who hold a great deal of power, even though they are under the patronage of a wealthy elite aristocrat.

So, after “what gives,” “what about today”?

Parables can be quite wonderful in that they have many layers and levels, and you can completely see something new after years of looking at one the same way over and over again.

The third person in the story could be a slave – could be a person with some power in a hierarchical system – could be a whistle-blower – and could be all three.

But I think the power of the story is in the experience of being given something you don’t expect, and then told to “do something” with it. From almost ten years in the 1980’s and 90’s I served as an Associate Pastor in a large UCC congregation in Wellesley, Massachusetts. One of the cornerstones of my work there was an annual year-long confirmation program for ninth graders. There were generally about thirty to thirty-five ninth grade confirmands, five twelfth grade seniors as peer advisors, and five adult advisors. This parable was one that we used for a mid-fall session on stewardship. We heard the Biblical story, and then one of the adults read a modern similar parable that she had written and set at the duck pond across the street from the church. Afterwards we gave each person three one dollar bills and simply told them to make it grow. In a few weeks we would decide what charity or benevolence would receive whatever money was returned.

Now, as the busy and over-committed adult I usually simply emptied out the loose change around the house and in the car, rolled it into the appropriate denominations, took it to the bank, and brought back maybe \$40 to \$60. But the teenagers were the ones who sometimes actually

wrestled with the Biblical story and with what to do in response. Sometimes they were truly inspirational. The most amazing example that I remember was one guy buying a few orange pumpkin garbage bags with his three dollars. He went door to door on his street and offered to rake leaves into the bags for a dollar per bag. They were then used as Halloween decorations. Well, people liked the idea and he kept going, buying more bags with the money he was making. He returned in three weeks with \$840 dollars! It was by far the all-time record.

Later his parents told me that he struggled with actually giving all the money back to the class. He had wondered about keeping some of it for himself as well as thinking he might have a bigger vote in determining where it should go. We all agreed that having unexpected money isn't initially good or bad, but it is what we do with it that matters.

Today we have Prayer and Pledge Cards in our worship bulletins. As a stewardship tool, it is about more than money – it is about time and sharing and hopes and dreams and prayers. It is also about being intentional in thinking about and then following through with how can I help make my dreams happen? As Dotty Armstrong said last week to our Chuukese friends – St. Paul's is a small but mighty congregation. This isn't a place where we have the luxury of thinking up some project for somebody else to do. If it is to get done, we – one of us right here, right now – is probably going to have to do it.

And it is OK to talk about money. In the Biblical narrative, Jesus talks far more about money than about any other issue. And in our world we often have our biggest church fights over such things – such as gay and lesbian issues for example – where Jesus says absolutely nothing.

In 2008 our total church budget was \$137,600. That primarily comes from our own giving, plus room use from the 12-Step groups – the Chuukese Church – the non-profit Washington Public Campaigns that rents Room 3, and special projects like the pancake breakfasts – book sales – and the auction. There has been a belief among some that the 12-Step groups carry the church financially – but in reality it covers 20 % of our budget and for the past few years the auction has brought in more money than 12-Step room use.

But the point about money that I'd like to share today is in the category of pledge outreach. Just like our own family or individual stewardship, St. Paul's gives some of our money away. Between our pledge to the United Church of Christ, our support of the Family and Adult Service Center, our carbon footprint offset, our conference covenantal obligations, and our giving to support small ecumenical progressive causes – we will give away \$7,340 in 2008.

So, when the rubber hits the road our church pledges \$7,340 to give away to mission out of an annual income of \$137,600. This translates into giving away just under 5 ½ % of our annual income. And this does not include special offerings, homemade shelter soup and cookies, emergency feeding program canned goods, donated glasses, recycling paper goods, and so on.

I think that this 5 ½ % figure is a helpful tool for us in thinking about our own financial giving as well as our gratitude. It is a good way to measure our willingness to give back the gifts and resources to which we have been entrusted – whether money or skills or time or getting whatever-it-is-that-needs-to-get-done done.

There will be years or times when we cannot do what we would like. There will be times when we approach our finances more out of fear than out of love or gratitude. Life happens. But if we always look at our support and our responsibility in fear-based ways, then something else is going on for us. And it is important to try to figure that out – for ourselves as well as for the communities and institutions that we could more fully support.

The Biblical narrative talks about tithing 10 % of our resources back to God. St. Paul's gives 5 ½ % of its financial income away. According to experts on charitable giving, most families in the United States give away even less – the average ranging from nothing to 3 %. I believe that this is helpful information for all of us in how we discern our giving and our sharing for those things for which we truly have gratitude.

In Friday's Seattle Post-Intelligencer newspaper there was an article about the Seattle National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) local chapter turning 95 this week. A quote in that article resonated with me. "One of the problems for an organization like this is that it is often considered irrelevant – until you need it," said Quintard Taylor, a professor of African-American history at the University of Washington. "It becomes relevant when you're in trouble, relevant when there's a crisis. When there's no apparent crisis, it fades."

When St. Paul's celebrated our centennial in 2004, we received a letter from the Washington State Secretary of State, Sam Reed. It is still posted in the lobby stairwell. He congratulated us in that out of the nearly 4,000 organizations that incorporated in the state in 1904 – St. Paul's Evangelical Church being one of them – only 43 continue to exist today. We are one of only 43 organizations incorporated in 1904 remaining out of almost 4,000!

Like our wider culture, if we were to support St. Paul's only "when we need it," our church might not continue in the ways we expect. There are certainly examples - especially here in Ballard – of churches that have closed or no longer function in their original way. Our Prayer and Pledge Card is one way of being intentional about our support and our stewardship. And I believe the practice of thinking this through is even more important than whatever it is we give.

Giving. Gratitude. Talents. Sharing. Fear. Love. In closing hear a short poem on today's parable written by Ann Weams in her book Searching for Shalom:

*All of us from time to time have dug our hiding places  
and buried our songs or our silver.  
Thinking our voices too weak and our offering too meager,  
Out of fear we have buried our talents.  
What bothers us, of course, is the reaction to the third servant,  
for Jesus is talking directly to us,  
the ones who have been entrusted with God's Word.  
Jesus reminds us that it is God's gifts we bury.  
Let us, in this new Church resolve to unearth our talents  
and offer unto God all that we have and are!  
Amen.*

### **1 Thessalonians 5:1-11**

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

### **Matthew 25:14-30**

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."

"After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, '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.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, '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.'

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.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; 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 weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"