



“Our Heavy Talents”

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Matthew 25:14-30

For many of us who grew up in the Baptist church, we were at church for Sunday School, for worship, for Sunday night services, and for Wednesday night prayer meetings. I remember even staying late on Wednesday nights at Judson Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee while my parents were at Sanctuary Choir practice with our own Harry Wooten. My twin brother and I would sit in the darkened Sanctuary and do homework, draw pictures, and play games.

But before Sanctuary Choir practice, while the adults were in prayer meeting, was RAs and GAs, the Royal Ambassadors and the Girls in Action. Being in RAs was like being in the Boy Scouts. We would go on camping trips, create and race pinewood derby cars (of which I would create the coolest looking car that was as slow as molasses), and we would study missionaries and learn about Baptist leaders. And we had a pledge that went something like this: “As a Royal Ambassador I will do my best to become a well-informed, responsible follower of Christ; To have a Christ-like concern for all people; To learn how to carry the message of Christ around the world; To work with others in sharing Christ; To keep myself clean and healthy in mind and body.”

Another way that being in RAs was similar to being in Boy Scouts was that each boy had a navy-blue vest with gold piping around the waist and the sleeves with plenty of free space to put all of the cool patches and pins we could earn for attendance, camping skills, disaster relief help, and meeting missionaries. When I first began as a Royal Ambassador I didn't have any badges, but when I finished and went to college, I had a vest overflowing. As a One on the Enneagram and a perfectionist, I loved the patches and saw them as a checklist to get to the next level. I always liked that you could check off requirements and then get a reward. I really resonated with a fellow perfectionist, Garey Wisdom, when he told us on Wednesday night during his interview that he worked in a bank because, at least to me, working in a bank feels similar to being in RAs and getting patches. It feels like a very structured system of merits and rewards.

It seems to me that we could easily look at this parable of the talents in our Gospel lesson for today and think that the kingdom of heaven operates like a bank where we invest wisely and then we'll have a high return. It's something called the Prosperity Gospel. We plant a seed and then reap a huge harvest. But I would say, most of us have heard a version of this parable where the talents are not money at all but abilities that we've been given to invest on behalf of the kingdom. And if we don't use them we lose them. I hear this interpretation most often. But, is that what this text means? We've heard it a thousand times, preached a thousand times – we should use our talents, 100% of ourselves, to the glory of God. But should we see the harsh master as God who confronts us and berates us for not doing enough with what we've been so graciously given?

You see, this why this is one of those well-worn stewardship texts. Most preachers jump on this parable to guilt people into giving their time, treasures, and talents to the kingdom of God. It is a text that always comes up at the end of the year in the lectionary when we are trying to get in all of our pledges and think about the church's budget for next year. So, I can see why this parable would be an easy and manipulative tool for many preachers. However, as for me, and as you know I'm apt to do, I feel this parable deserves a hard reassessment. I want us to examine the characters and their actions in this text with new eyes.

One place we can began is with our understanding of the word "talent." A talent in Jesus's day was an incredible fortune, the equivalent of twenty years' wages. As one commentator said, "This story should be called 'The Parable of the Fortune Funds.'" That's how much money is involved. I, personally, think this story should be could the "Parable of the Heavy Talents." A talent was not only a great sum of money but many scholars assume that a talent of gold probably weighed about seventy-five pounds! The three servants were given this heavy financial burden and they had to figure out how to use and, as we will see, abuse the money given to them by their master.

As we look at the financial landscape of Jesus's time, most commercial trade or investing in Palestine was done by the wealthy one percent--meaning the most prosperous merchants, royalty, and priests. Historians and scholars feel there were two common ways that someone in ancient Palestine with a lot of money could make a profit from investing. The first was by lending to those involved in the currency exchange business in the Temple. When Jews or other travelers came to Jerusalem from other parts of the world, they needed to change their international currency into the local Jewish currency, and the exchange tables, the money changing tables that Jesus would turn over in anger, served this purpose. The fees and exaggerated exchange rates were very high.

The second form of investment was in loans to small agricultural families struggling to stay afloat in the declining first century economy. Most loans made huge returns on their investment because interest rates were astronomically high. The purpose for loans then, as we see today with pay day lending, was primarily for the purpose of getting borrowers in over their heads and then foreclosing on and taking their property. These victims would then either become tenants on what had been their own property, or homeless, or join the ranks of the growing number of bandits or revolutionary militias.

So, I strongly feel that this parable was about money and the abusive system that the master and the servants perpetuated. I think we need to put the notion of ability and personality talents out of our heads and realize this isn't a parable about playing the piano in church, serving on the missions committee, or teaching a youth Sunday School class. This parable is really about profits and margins and commissions. It is about those who choose to abuse the less-fortunate, the poor, and the marginalized. It is about those small few, that third servant, who refuse to be a part of a cruel and terrible system.

So, what about the one who resisted? What about that under-achiever? What about the one who was perceived as wicked and lazy just because he didn't want to participate in the brutal, cutthroat world of abusive banking and lending? He was thrown into the darkness for not taking

advantage of others. As one commentator says of the parable, “If that’s really what the ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ is like, God looks more like a ruthless Wall Street tycoon than a loving creator and redeemer.” In this kingdom, in this parable, we see that the rich and unscrupulous are blessed even more and the poor, the lonely, and the needy are cast out and ignored and forgotten. The text troublingly says, “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.” Make no mistake, if the parable of the talents is not reassessed and examined with a different lens, then the “kingdom of heaven” remains a strict system of earning rewards, and there’s not much room for grace or forgiveness or mercy. This story becomes harsh and horrifying. This parable of the talents becomes heavy.

And the reason this parable is heavy and punitive is because we see that the divine figure, the master, is a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. For me, the master in this parable is the very opposite of the God of Israel who brought God’s people into a land flowing with milk and honey, drinking from wells they did not dig and reaping harvests that they did not plant. It is unlike the God who tells harvesters to leave the edges of their wheat fields unharvested, drop sheaves behind, and not strip the vines or shake the olive trees, so that those who have nothing to sow can reap anyway. It is unlike Jesus’s parable of the sower who goes out and throws seed wastefully all over the place, knowing that whatever lands on the good soil will produce beyond measure while even the bad soil gets the grain.

In my radical reading of the text, this is not a prescriptive parable of how we all need to use our time, talents, and treasures well, but how we must resist the abusive system that prevails when harsh, absentee landlords give money to servants, only to demand back an unhealthy return. And in the midst of this narrative, the third servant (and here’s a little hint – often the third character in a parable is the hero) refuses and the parable is transformed into a parable of justice. It is a parable of resistance. It is a parable of someone who declined to participate in that process where lush landowners and their lackeys were the primary interface between the poor Jewish peasantry and the powerful Roman Empire.

The third person, the third servant, denounces the crime, buries the money, and in the end, gets crucified for his actions. It is telling that he put the money in the ground, which is ultimately created and owned by God. Maybe Jesus is saying that the third servant gave the money back to God, the ultimate owner. The third servant, in my opinion, is the hero, not a worthless outcast. He denounces the abuse of the poor by those with immense power. He refuses to put his money into the dishonest banks who at that time took advantage of the weak and rewarded the strong. The heroic third servant fought back against a harsh, abusive system and he paid the ultimate price. That servant, deemed lazy, worthless, and unfaithful by the Empire gave his life for refusing to play along. How do we learn from the third servant? How do we resist when our talents become heavy? How do we give back to God, to God’s creation, to the earth, rather than to the proud and the powerful?

I like to understand the stories Jesus tells through the eyes of the author of the entire Gospel, who in this case is Matthew. This brutal and moneygrubbing master doesn’t sound much like the God of Matthew who blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness as it says in Chapter 5. It doesn’t sound much like the God who

freely gives the blessings of sun and rain to all alike. It doesn't sound much like the God who feeds and clothes those who have little faith. Or the God who gives good things to those who ask like any parent does with a child in Matthew Chapter 7. It doesn't sound like the God who cares so much about each one of us as to keep track of the very hairs of our head. And it doesn't sound like the God of Matthew Chapter 18 who seeks us out like a shepherd seeking one lost sheep because it is not God's will that one of these little ones should be lost.

Nor does the idea of a kingdom that operates based on merit and rewards sound much like the strange kingdom Jesus preaches and teaches about. Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Dr. Alan Brehm says, "In this strange kingdom, there is nothing to earn, no merits or rewards to rack up. And everybody gets the same gift – God's full and free acceptance. In this strange kingdom, the religious 'under-achievers' gain entry ahead of those who think they've racked up more spiritual points. In this strange kingdom, God doesn't throw people into 'outer darkness,' because the only judgment is based on God's mercy that forgives all sin and creates the possibility of new life for everyone. It is a strange kingdom indeed – one that works completely contrary to the way things work in our world."

In this strange kingdom, the plain truth is that we're all under-achievers. On our own, none of us can ever earn enough merit badges. But I think that's Jesus's point – the "kingdom of heaven" works completely differently from "The Parable of the Fortune Funds." God's kingdom is a place where our burdens are shouldered by Jesus rather than us being haunted by them. In this strange kingdom, there are no badges and no rewards, because everything is a gift. In the kingdom of heaven, everything depends on God's love, which never fails, and God's grace, which always finds us, and God's mercy, which embraces us completely, heavy talents and all.

Amen.