**November 19, 2023 Matthew 25:14-30**

***A Matter of Trust***

**Scripture:**

*(14)For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; (15)to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. (16)The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. (17)In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. (18)But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. (19)After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. (20)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.' (21)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.' (22)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.' (23)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.' (24)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; (25)so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' (26)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? (27)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. (28)So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. (29)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. (30)As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV*

**Notes:**

1. The Master commends their ***faithfulness***.
   1. He praises their ***willingness***.
   2. Each receives the same ***commendation***.
      1. “*Well done, good and faithful servant*.”
   3. Each receives the same ***invitation***.
      1. “*You have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things.  Enter into the joy of your lord*.”
   4. It’s not their cleverness that produces the ***results***.
   5. It is their ***willingness*** to act for the master out of trust.
2. The parable is about ***trust***.
   1. The master ***trusts*** his servants and ***acts*** on this trust.
   2. Two of them, act out of trust rather than ***fear***,
   3. The third portrays a master who ***demands*** success.
   4. The love their master shows them ***overcomes*** their fear.
3. This story upends the standards of the ***world***.
   1. Fear that keeps treasure in the ground is ***atheism***.
   2. Freedom that puts that treasure at risk is an act of ***faith***.
   3. Learn from our ***failures***.
   4. Fear teaches us nothing until we ***leave*** it ***behind***.
4. God has no interest in keeping ***score***.
   1. God’s concern is that we all get up and ***take*** a ***turn*** at bat.
   2. Success is found in our ***willingness*** to risk.
   3. Security is found in the ***reliable*** God who trusts us.
5. What’s important is our willingness to ***risk*** and to ***trust***.
   * 1. *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* Philippians 4:13 NRSV
   1. Be ***bold***, Be ***courageous***, Be ***obedient***.

**Script:**

This week, when I read the gospel passage for this Sunday in November, I was quickly taken back to a district assembly at the Hunt Valley Resort. I cannot remember exactly what year, but it was either 2002 or 2003. The jurisdictional General Superintendent was Dr. Paul Cunningham. I remember sitting on the right side of the platform, about four rows back.

The message that evening was on the passage we will be reading from here in a minute, Matthew 25:14-30. As I listened that evening, I heard one word that brought different meanings into my head. The word was “*talent*”. As I listened My heart was melting and my mind was drawing into the words, and as I listened, I could hear the Lord speaking directly to me, “*Kevin, I have blessed you with many talents, how are you using them for my kingdom?*” For the longest time I was worried that I was imagining the encounter. Many times, I wondered, could this really have been the words of God speaking to me? I even called a friend and inquired about how I would be able to know if it was the Lord speaking or just my imagination. His response was that I would just know.

Have you ever heard the Lord speaking to you, directly to you? Have you ever heard words of instruction so clearly that you thought for sure everybody else must have heard them as well? How did you respond? What did you do? What was the result of your actions? I’m guessing most of you know the Parable of the Talents; and, if need be, could do a good job preaching the sermon this morning, hitting on all the important points:

A wealthy landowner prepared to go on an extended leave.  Before he left, he entrusted various amounts of money to his servants.  He gave five talents to one, two talents to another, and one talent to another – each according to his ability.

When he got back, he called the servants for an account of what they’d done with the money.  The first two put it to work.  As a result, they doubled the original investment.  They had twice as much as before.  The third buried his one talent in the ground, so that he had exactly the same as he had been given – no more, no less.  The landowner was furious: “At least you could have put it in the bank where it would have drawn interest,”.  In a fit of anger, he took back the talent and gave it to the servant who now had ten talents.  As for the one-talent man, the landowner told his henchmen to cast him into outer darkness, where men weep and gnash their teeth.

That’s the story, and the lesson that follows usually goes something like this: Use what you have, however much or little, to the best of your ability to the glory of God.  And know this: One of these days you’ll be called to account for how you used the time, talent and treasure God has given you.  So, don’t hold back and don’t be afraid.  Dare to venture out and go for broke.  It’d be better to lose it all, than sit on what you’ve got and forfeit your place in God’s great kingdom.  That’s the message of the Parable of the Talents.  But before we say, Amen, and put it back on the shelf, I’d like to take a closer look, so stand with me and open your scriptures to Matthew 25:14-30

*(14)For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; (15)to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. (16)The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. (17)In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. (18)But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. (19)After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. (20)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.' (21)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.' (22)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.' (23)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.' (24)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; (25)so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' (26)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? (27)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. (28)So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. (29)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. (30)As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Matthew 25:14-30 NRSV*

Perhaps*,* the Parable of the Talents isn’t really about money or ability. Maybe this parable is about something even more important. I would like you to entertain the thought that the Parable of the Talents is about trust. Consider this:

The story opens with an act of trust. The master is about to leave town on a journey. He entrusts his wealth to three servants. Each is given a different sum of money. Yet each is given a big amount; one talent or two or five. It’s clear that the master trusts each of his servants. He even hands over the money without any instructions.

After a long time, the master returns and calls in his three servants. Two of them have doubled their money. The third has made nothing at all; he returns to his master exactly what he received. It turns out that this servant had simply buried the money in the ground, a common security measure in ancient times. He reveals the reason for his action: he was afraid of his master. The third servant's trust in his master was zero, so he reduced his financial risk to zero. Yet he reduced the possibility of profit so that it also was zero.

The story as we have it leaves us with an unanswered question. How would the master have responded to the first two servants if they had not brought in a profit? What if they had put the money at risk and come back empty-handed? Do you think the master would have received them with acceptance? I think so; I think the master would have accepted them. After all, in the parable what he commends is not their profits, What he commends is their faithfulness. He praises their willingness to work for the good of the kingdom. He does not commend the servant who produced five talents more than the one who produced two. Each receives the same commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Each receives the same invitation: “*You have been faithful over a few things, I will set you over many things.  Enter into the joy of your lord*.”

In response to the third servant, the master makes it clear that he would have accepted anything, even rock-bottom savings account interest, that was motivated by faith rather than fear. Take note, the servant who is given five talents makes five talents more, and the one who receives two makes two more. This doubling in each case suggests that the growth is automatic. It’s not the cleverness of the servants that produces the results as much as their willingness to act for the good of their master out of trust.

The parable is not about money or ability so much as it is about trust. The master trusts his servants and acts on this trust. The servants, or at least two of them, return the favor by acting out of trust rather than fear, and they come back to their master with one fortune stacked on top of another. The third servant paints an ugly picture of a grasping master who demands success. What this servant gets for his trouble is exactly the rejection he fears. He’s a small-minded man who insists that his master is just as small-minded.

The other two servants, however, recognize generosity when they see it. The piles of money thrust their way, their rewards reveal a guy who’s pretty generous, who takes a risk, who accepts them, even honors them. Finding themselves at the receiving end of such outrageous trust, they feel empowered, and are willing to take risks of their own. The love their master has shown them overcomes their fear of failure. They realize that any master who treats his money managers in this open-handed way is more interested in them than in turning a profit.

This brief story about a master and his three servants turns upside down the standards of the world. It announces that the worst thing that can happen to us is not failure. The worst thing that can happen is that we make God out to be a horrible old grouch who rejects us when we fail. The story tells us that the worst thing is not losing out. The worst thing is never risking. In the eyes of God, the fear that keeps a treasure in the ground is an act of atheism. The freedom that puts that treasure at risk and may even result in its loss is an act of faith. We can learn from our failures, and often it is failure that provides the most indelible lessons. But fear teaches us nothing until we leave it behind.

The gospel stage is crowded with people. People who try to shock us into the recognition that it is stupid and ugly not to trust God. There’s the snide elder brother who refuses to welcome home the prodigal son. The all-day workers who demand that late arrivals receive less than the daily wage. The Pharisee who tries to talk God into accepting him because he’s kept the rules, not because God is merciful. All these live in a gray, fearful world, where grace is absent and slackers get thrown to the wolves.

We understand these pathetic people, because we too are given to burying our talent out of fear. We’re made anxious by the ogre idol of our imagination. we hide behind the tyranny of the urgent; that we are too busy to serve a God who loves us this much.We know what it’s like to misperceive and mistrust God. What if the true, living, and only God has no interest in keeping score? What if God’s concern is simply that we all get up and take a turn at bat?

The Good News of Jesus gives new meaning to success and security. Success is found, not in accumulating more than we can ever use, but in our willingness to risk in response to God’s invitation. When God gives you an idea, don’t hide in fear, take a chance. Security is found, not in keeping pace with our rising paranoia, but in the utterly reliable God who trusts us before we trust ourselves, a God who risks, and asks that we risk also.

To sum up, let me share with you words from the French scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In his best-known book, The Divine Milieu, he writes: “*God obviously has no need of the products of your busy activity since he could give himself everything without you. The only thing that concerns him, the only thing that he desires intensely, is your faithful use of your freedom and the preference you accord him over the things around you. Try to grasp this: the things that are given to you on earth are given to you purely as an exercise, a bank sheet on which you make your own mind and heart. You are on a testing ground where God can judge whether you are capable of being translated to heaven and into his presence. You are on trial so that it matters very little what becomes of the fruits of the earth, or what they are worth. The whole question is whether you have learned how to obey and how to love*.”

The Parable of the Talents is not really about money or abilities. It’s a story about trust, a story about risk. Life’s the same way. What’s important is not money or abilities in themselves, but our decision to use them in ways that show our willingness to risk and to trust. The central question about life is not “What did we accomplish?” but whether we learned to obey, whether we learned to love.

I would like to close today with words from Dr. Robert Schuller, “*What great thing would you attempt if you knew you could not fail?*  (Robert Schuller) The answer is very simple and found in Philippians 4:13, “*I can do all things through him who strengthens me.* Philippians 4:13 NRSV” Do not be afraid to do what you feel the Lord leads you to do. Be bold, Be courageous, Be obedient.