

The parable of the talents must be heard as a chord, not as a single note. Several tones come together in this parable as part of the flow of an on-going harmony. Some of the tones in this particular parable are in tension with each other. But as with a good deal of both classical music and jazz, the tension in this chord will be resolved by another chord coming along to create the balance between compatible and conflicting tones that the human ear finds pleasant, satisfying and often beautiful.

Let me show you what I mean: When preachers and teachers want to reduce the parable of the talents to one note, they often choose to frame the “talents” as abilities that we’ve been given to invest on behalf of the kingdom of God, and insist that if we don’t use them, we will lose them. Consequently, sermons on this parable tend to focus on stewardship with challenges to discover the gifts, resources and skills that God has given a parish, and to use those gifts wisely and generously to participate in God’s work of bringing the kingdom of heaven closer.

We urge people to get into action to serve the common good and to build the church as the body of Christ given for all. We remind each other that everything we have and are truly belongs to God and is only on loan to us while we are here, and that we do well to act as though we will have to answer for our actions—to be accountable for the decisions we make about what has been entrusted to us. That includes the community of faith and the Gospel message that God has entrusted to our care and custody and sharing. These are great messages and true, and I do encourage you to do just that: discern the resources and gifts that God has provided and put them to work here at St Elizabeth!

Responsive, trusting stewardship is a one great note to take away from this reading, but the parable of the talents must be heard as a chord, not as a single note. The impulse to make this parable one note rather than a chord is so powerful that in English, Spanish, German, Dutch, Italian and French, the word “talent” has come to mean something like “natural abilities, inclinations or dispositions.” These languages all get the word “talent” from this passage. But “talent” comes from a Greek word used in ancient Babylon that means “a measure of weight,” most likely, a weight of silver. One talent was about 6,000 denarii or about what a day laborer could earn in

about 15 to 20 years. That means the person in charge of five talents was working with something in the range of \$150,000 by today's standards and the one handling two talents managed to double \$60,000, while the third buried the \$30,000 put in his care. So instead of the parable of the talents, first century Mediterranean peasants might prefer that we call this the parable of the wealth management team. And they would not have heard this story as a call to put gifts into action. Their version, the second tone, is in tension with the first. Let me show you what I mean.

You see, in first century Mediterranean culture, people across all economic levels believed that all the wealth that was *possible* not only already existed but had already been distributed. Consequently, the only way to get any more was to take it from someone else, so gaining wealth was immoral. Those with large amounts of money were already suspected of using slaves who had no social honor, to do the dishonorable work involved in gaining more wealth. That two of the slaves managed to *double* already huge amounts of money would have been seen as outrageous greed. Consequently, where the first version portrays the third slave as being paralyzed by his fear and distrust, the peasants first hearing this story might well have held the third servant to be a person of principle who refused to participate in a corrupt system despite the consequence of being thrown into the outer darkness.

On that last point, we need to be very clear: this is *not* a parable about who is in and who is out of heaven. I am in complete agreement with one of my liturgical theology professors, Fr. Paul, who said, "I am required canonically to teach that there *is* a hell, but there is nothing that compels me to say that there is anyone there." This parable is not about heaven and hell, but is instead one more story about how we need to act while we wait. The reference to outer darkness would have meant the edge of the city to first century listeners who knew that people could in this way be essentially shunned from society.

As we unpack the first century perspective, new issues arise, especially in the light of the gap between the rich and the poor that is even now growing wider, and that there are people among and around us who have been abused by the very system that maintains this gap. The moral of the story, when framed in economic terms *only*, is deeply problematic: "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 a reference to material wealth, this statement directly contradicts the prophet Amos' warning to those who add field to field and who sell

the sweepings of their fields instead of leaving behind the edges and dropped sheaves for those who have no land. All through Matthew, we hear from Jesus about God's promise to feed and clothe those with little faith. The same God who seeks us out like a shepherd searching for one lost sheep so that not "one of these little ones should be lost." And didn't Jesus say "blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"? Is the third slave being persecuted for standing up against a corrupt system? The ancient perspective leaves room for that possibility.

When these two perspectives are separated from each other, they can appear to be making different points. The tone that compels us to put our resources into action seems to be in a certain tension with the tone that insists that we refuse to support the unjust acquisition of resources. But this parable must be heard as a chord, not as single notes. Fortunately, there is a root that completes the chord and then there is a harmony that binds them.

The root is this: first, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our mind, and second to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the opening of our parable, the Master entrusts staggering treasures to people and then *gives them space* to make their own decisions. And so perhaps both the two who acted and the one who did not act made their decision out of fear of the Master. Or perhaps one decided to make a principled stand and the others decided to give in to greed. Or perhaps all three acted on principle out of their love of God and neighbor.

We don't know because we are only engaged with their surfaces—with what is said *about* them—we are not engaged with their interiors—with what they think and feel, and what motivated them. In other words, *we are not fully in relationship with them*. We do this with each other and with God—we act on our assumptions about each other or God without exploring our assumptions with each other. God gives us room—openings into which we can take chances as we try to live and learn as images of God. And what we think about God and do in response is not trivial, but has genuine consequences. What if the first two servants saw their master as a good and generous person but never questioned whether the master's policies were just? What if the third servant saw the master as a harsh man, but never tested his perception? What if the master, in saying, "You *knew*, did you?" was challenging the servant's perception? "Did you really *know* that?" Or was it an assumption?

I wonder, what untested perceptions of God are we carrying around inside us? Do we think of God as gracious or harsh? Forgiving or judgmental? Eager for peace or prone to violence? It makes a difference! Are we routinely questioning our assumptions about God *with* God?

This parable is one in a sequence—the third of four stories in Matthew about the implications of the death, resurrection and coming again of the Christ. The story is one set of tones—one chord filled with tension—in a sequence. The sequence harmonizes this reading’s chord with the story of the wedding banquet that we heard last week and the entire sequence will come to resolution in the reading that we will hear next week. The entire sequence is a flow of insights into what to do while we are waiting. The more we act as though we are already in the kingdom of heaven—that is to say, the more we live into and become the Gospel—the more the kingdom of heaven spreads—*even as we wait*—and the more we come to know the heart of the Risen Christ, the more deeply we come into relationship with God. On the other hand, the more we contract in fear or isolate ourselves with indifference or inaction, the farther away God’s kingdom feels to us and the farther out of relationship with God we slide.

For to all those who have—those who are *in* relationship with God—more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing—*no* relationship with God—even what they have will be taken away.