

Matthew 25:14-30

Have you ever been in a fun house or a House of Mirrors where you walk past the mirrors and watch as your reflection gets all distorted? Depending on where you stand, you can look shorter or taller, fatter or thinner. It's all an optical illusion. Art is a lot like that. What one person sees is not what another may see. What the artist drew or painted is not always apparent to those viewing the work of art. Our perception of the drawing or painting affects how we interpret what we see. Our perceptions also affect the way we interpret life. What we were taught, learned, or experienced in our early years, determines how we see the world.

This morning I would like to consider two different ways of seeing or interpreting the parable about the servants or talents. Both interpretations make sense, just like a picture that holds several images for its viewers. The images are there, but it takes some effort to see all sides and angles.

In the first interpretation, Jesus is giving his listeners an illustration about the Kingdom of God. He says, "It's like a man who is going away on a journey, and he leaves his servants with a certain amount of silver, each according to his ability." To the first he gave five bags or pounds of silver which was worth about a lifetime of wages.

To the second servant he gave, two bags of silver, and to the third servant, one bag. The servants are entrusted with something very special, and each one is left to decide what to do with what they have been given.

The first servant takes his silver, his portion, and invests it; and through supposedly smart management he sees the silver start to grow, doubling the master's original amount.

The second servant does the same thing. He takes his two bags of silver, and is able to double what he has been given. Now the interesting thing about both of these servants, is that they were able to take what the master had given them, and were able to recognize that what they had been **given** by the master was meant to be **used**. Only in that **conscious decision** to risk using what they had been entrusted with, were they able to multiply that gift for use in the master's business, or the Kingdom of God.

For both of these servants, it was a leap of faith, to risk perhaps losing the money, or if considering a real talent, or spiritual gift, to risk making some mistakes. But they did it, and because they were ready to take real chances, to step out in faith, they were able to do great things and to give a wonderful report to the master when he returned.

The third servant, motivated by fear, took his portion of the silver and buried it in the ground. It was like stuffing one's mattress with half a million dollars. He just couldn't or wouldn't take the same kind of risk that the other two did. He was afraid of what his master would do to him if he tried to invest the silver and then lost it. His security and safety depended on how he managed this great lump of silver and he was scared.

On some level, one could say that maybe he was protecting the master's

money. Maybe he **was** keeping it safe. Now the money was secure and so was he; at least that's what he thought. But this servant, for whatever his reason, just wasn't able to take that leap of faith and use what he had been given.

Many people think they're safe when they do things like the timid servant. Some church members probably think they're secure when they take all the gifts and talents God gives them, enjoy them for their own benefit, then sit back and wait for the auditing day to come, assuming that if they've got their little heavenly bank account full, safely tucked away, then everything will be properly transacted when the day of accounting arrives.

Some of us may think the church is like a hole in the ground or a mattress. We just stuff the gifts God has given us into the mattress and feel content when it bulges like a mountain, convinced in our own mind that since we've gone to church and done a few acts of charity now and then, God must reward us for amassing all that heavenly currency. So, at the pearly gates when we look for our name in the book of life, we will proudly declare that it must be there since we've got this enormous padded bag filled with heavenly currency. We plunk it down at Saint Peter's feet demanding entry and say, "Here you have what is yours!"

Of course, Jesus isn't talking about money. He's talking about faith, love, hope, charity, kindness, abilities, life, work, and using all of them for the kingdom. He's talking about people and the way they live. Those who think they can pile up credits in heaven for themselves simply by hoarding the gifts God has given had better re-enroll in the spiritual

economics class and learn a few things about divine banking procedures

Sometimes we find ourselves in similar situations, where we are given opportunities to use our talents, our time, our money, our energy, our spiritual gifts. We see an opportunity, but we're afraid that we might mess up, or that we might use our gifts in the wrong way. We might see a chance to do something special, something that we know we have the opportunity and ability to do, and we have the resources, but we lack the courage to step out in faith and use what God has given us.

So, in our first interpretation, we learn that we are all, whether as individuals or as a community, entrusted with abilities, talents and resources. The master gives them to us to use, not to bury. The first thing to learn is that God likes risks. If ever there was a risky thing to do, it was the risk God took in sending his only Son, his beloved Son, to be crucified and die. Yes, God had planned that salvation would come through it all. From a human point of view it was a pretty foolhardy thing to try. So, in our first interpretation, the master represents God who gives us many gifts and talents and expects us to use them for the Kingdom.

But, let's consider a second possible interpretation of this passage. It is not the traditional one, but makes just as much sense. This second interpretation asks us to imagine that this story is not about **God** representing the master; and not an illustration about the Kingdom of God. But rather, the master is a very wealthy landowner, just as the story says. He is wealthy beyond measure, and he leaves his three top employees a certain amount of his property to take care of while he goes

on a trip, giving to each a portion according to their power, ability, reputation, or status in his business.

Now, if we read this story *in context*, the people who Jesus would have been talking to while he was telling this story would have been peasants in Palestine. When Jesus mentioned a wealthy landowner and the bag of silver, an amount worth about 6 million dollars by today's standards, it would have been very clear to the peasants who the wealthy person represented. The people would have known right away that Jesus was speaking of the people who owned their homes, the ones who would raise taxes, the ones with the power to alter the laws, put constraints on their freedoms, and to keep them in a state of poverty.

When Jesus said that the landowner put his three top guys in charge, the people would have also known what that meant; the three men would have orders to get the money multiplied in any way they saw fit, including putting even more pressure on the peasants as the tax collectors Matthew and Zacchaeus did. They not only collected taxes for Caesar, but also for themselves by cheating and taking more than required. The system was corrupt, and the rich continued to get richer and the poor poorer.

So when the wealthy man comes back, the first two servants get rewarded for doing what they were charged to do – **make money**. The third servant, because he hid his bag of silver, gets punished. He is cast out. He loses his job. He didn't cheat the people. Although we are not told how the other two doubled their bags of silver, the people listening to the parable could very easily conclude that, like the tax collectors,

there was probably some dishonesty involved.

But it is this third servant, in this version of the story, who could be called the hero. Because it is the third servant who **saw** the master for who he really was. He saw what he was supposed to do, and realized that in order to do it, he would have to buy into and perpetuate a corrupt system. He refused. And he tells his boss: "I know you are a harsh man. I don't want any more of this. Here's your money. Take it back."

There's a key line in this parable, when the master asks the third servant – 'so... you thought I was wicked, did you? That I reap where I don't sow?' The master was calling him on his perception. And the boss, in turn, casts him out of his service. He gets fired! "You go be a peasant yourself now. You can't have this lap of luxury life any more." The interesting thing is, that the third servant was aware of the risk going in. He was willing to risk being poor himself, to have to live among the oppressed, in order to not participate in the corruption. It was his ultimate sacrifice for the people.

So, in this second possible interpretation, Jesus is giving the people an illustration of how the world is and that sometimes we must be willing to risk and sacrifice our own comfort, for the greater good. Sometimes we have to take a step against the system: not buy into it, not condone the oppression around us. It's a social justice issue.

These are two of the possible ways to interpret this story. The second interpretation is the way the peasants would have seen the parable. A common thread that runs through both of these interpretations is the

perceptions of each of the servants; what they thought about the master determined their course of action.

The question for us today both as individuals and as a church is, how do we perceive our heavenly master? How do we view this creator of all things who has entrusted us with gifts and talents beyond our imagination? What is our relationship with the God who has given us life?

If we are like the third servant, see God as an angry harsh God, waiting to hit us over the head with a lightning bolt when we mess up, then there is no way we can risk anything. There's no way we will ever be able to step out in faith to use what God has given us. If we fear the consequences and are motivated by fear, then we'll never be able to do great things and use our gifts. Our talents and resources will never grow.

You might say, 'but the third servant DID get punished, the master DID turn out to be harsh. He got thrown in to the street with the gnashing of teeth stuff!' And I would respond that it was his own **interpretation**, his own **perception** of who God is that put him there because that's the only place that is open to him. If you view God as a wrathful angry God, you put yourself forever in a place of torment.

How can you be free to enjoy the wonders of salvation through Christ if your image of him is one of fear and condemnation? Don't we profess to believe that 'there is **NO** condemnation for those who are in Christ, that, according to Paul, nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ?'

If the first two servants in the first interpretation understood who the master was, and knew that when it came right down to it, there was really no risk at all. They understood that they or we, serve a wealthy, beyond-measure, benevolent, generous God who has doled out for us more than we can ever think or see or imagine.

We serve a God who has blessed us with gifts beyond our wildest imagination, and that the only risk involved is in not using those gifts. There is no **fear** of messing up, because when you've experienced God's love, you realize that God's love is perfect, and perfect love casts out all fear. And you might say, "I know, I know I have to do it. I know I have gifts. I know I'm supposed to be doing something, and I'll do it. I will do it, but not just yet. The timing isn't right. First, I have to be more prepared. I have to get more money. I have to have more. I'll do it **tomorrow**." Well guess what? Tomorrow isn't promised!

We only have today, and we can't afford to let one more day pass without accepting the opportunities that God has put before us. We can't let one more hour pass before we use our gifts, our talents, our money, our resources, for the things that God intends for us. We can't let one more minute pass before we accept the graciousness and the great abundance that God has poured out on each of us, to allow us to be all we are destined to be in Christ. The opportunity is there for each of us to be more than we ever dreamed of, and for our gifts to be used in ways we never thought possible.

It's the 'what would you do if you could do anything' moment; the 'what would you do if you weren't afraid' moment; the 'dare to dream the big

dream' moment; the 'Peter getting out of the boat moment'; even the 'I'm getting out of bed on my only day off Sunday to go to church' moment. It doesn't have to be big, but it's the moment that you realized that there was more out there that God was calling you to than you already were; that there was excellence within your grasp because you felt just a hint of it inside you and you allowed yourself, maybe for the first time, to dream of tapping into it.

And God continually pours it out saying: "Here! You're a teacher, teach my children." "Here! You're a musician, play for me." "Here! Here's money, do something special with it, something memorable." "Here! Here's JOY! I've given it to you. Use it. Be joyful!" "Here's hope. Share it with everyone!" "Here's peace. Spread it around."

Is there an end to the blessings we've been given? My prayer for us today is that we can **FEEL** what God has given to us, **BE** the unique persons God has made us, **LIVE** the dreams God has shown us about all that God has planned for us to be. For God knows the plans God has for us: to prosper and not harm, to give us hope and a future. We can't mess up God's plan! When it comes right down to it, there's no risk at all! We just need to take that first step.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Lent 5, MARCH 26, 2023

Gracious and loving God, we come to you with hearts that need to be opened to your word and your love. There is so much around us that tears at us and causes us to tremble. Keep us be ever mindful of your presence and the hope that you have given us in your Son Jesus Christ.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for the created world where human-made climate change, over-consumption, and pollution are creating a global water crisis, where 7 out of 10 most water-stressed nations are located in the Middle East and North Africa, home to so many of the world's poorest nations, as we commemorate World Water Day.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

Hear our prayers for all who need your tender touch of healing in their lives—those we name before you each day, and those who are known only to you in the depths of our hearts. We As well, be with those who mourn and surround them with peace . May we all remember the love and grace that your faithful people have brought to our world.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for refugees and displaced people: that those who have lost their former way of life may find a new beginning; and for growth and peace throughout the world, particularly in regions of conflict and war, especially Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria, Haiti, and the Holy Land. We ask for your care for the thousands of Ukrainian children being deported to Russia, many taken out of orphanages.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our Muslim neighbours, and our Muslim brothers and sisters throughout the world as they have begun Ramadan, the holiest month on their calendar.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our congregation as we face the challenges of the future and look for you to guide us. Help us to run the risk of losing things which we hold as precious so that we are more able to reach others with your good news. Help us to be wise in deciding what, if anything, to discard, what new vision, if any we should pursue. Help us to trust you for the new spring life which can flow out into our community.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

God, whose presence lives in those you call by name, whose presence goes before us into the lives of those to whom we minister, we hear your call to serve in a variety of places. We pray that each one of us, as we serve you in our particular ministry, may find renewed depth in our relationship with you; may be confirmed in our call to this ministry; may find our gifts and call affirmed. As we offer them in service, may they become a part of a healthy and life-giving community of faith.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

Loving God, when our wilderness journey ends and normality returns to our lives, remind us to look back and see where you carried us through, deepened our faith, and provided us with your loving care.

O Lord, hear our prayer.

Ours may be one small voice, but let it be a voice for wholeness, for healing, for peace, for love, for You! All this we ask through your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

Our Father....