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Matthew 25:14-30
Be Not Afraid
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Matthew 25:14-30 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Parable of the Talents

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,[a] 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.’

I don’t usually bring props when I preach, but this is one of favorite prayers I just threw on the back of a cheap poster board a year ago or so…it’s a selection from a hymn that Charles Wesley wrote called, “Where shall my wandering soul begin.” You can find it in your hymnal, if you want, UMH 342. It’s long, but I have the first and last verses here…he writes about this angst that we carry—Where shall I begin? How shall my soul to heaven aspire? Believe, he writes, believe, and yours is heaven, your guilt’s forgiven: so act, move, breathe, engage, seek God and be made new. This poem, long before I threw it on a poster, gives me strength, and gives me a truth which restores my soul—the truth of questioning faith and God and doubt, and being redeemed through it all—in spite of it all. Several of us, starting about this time last year, gathered a couple of times for prayer and art—we held a short prayer service and then spent some time painting or coloring or drawing, and this is one of the pieces I made.

Our scripture this morning, the parable of the talents, tells the story of slaves given talents (or money) from their Lord, and made responsible for the charge given them. The first two slaves actively interact with others—we don’t know how they produced doubling the talents, aside from ‘trading which results in a fruitful gain’, but I think it’s safe to assume they didn’t gamble and get lucky during a hand of gin rummy. And then, there’s the infamous third slave, the one who sat on his charge, his talents and produced nothing more than the initial gift. And the text tells us *he didn’t even try* because he was *afraid.*

These slaves were given what they could handle, according to their ability, so we’re already under the assumption that the third slave *probably wasn’t that good* at what they did, but still they weren’t left out. And his response to being included was fear. Probably a fear of not feeling capable of even having the small portion he was allotted—so he reacted in fear, reacted for preservation—to save the little bit, he even buried it so it wouldn’t get lost, or accidentally used; he avoided temptation and loss.

We do this in our lives—when we become afraid, we cling tightly to what we have that we deem precious. It’s a fear of scarcity and repercussion. We hope that in our clinging, we maintain a sense of control and preservation—we cling because we fear loss, change, or disappointment from those who trusted us. So we bury our talents—we stay hidden in the shadows, we don’t engage in difficult conversations when we know that injustice is being lauded, we pretend that we don’t see the woman at the corner with the worn down cardboard sign, we fail to hear our neighbor’s cracking voice when she responds, “I’m fine,” because burying ourselves is simply easier—sometimes we use the excuse, “I’ve got to do me.”

But that’s not what God is calling us and entrusting us to do and be. The master in this text cries out against his slave, “you didn’t even put it in a bank…” which is the rough equivalent of, “you aren’t even trying…why?”

There’s a hauntingly beautiful piece of music, Adagio for Strings, by Samuel Barber. The piece, if you don’t know, and if you don’t, feel free to spotify search after the service, the piece takes the listener on a journey of angst and longing. The piece builds over and over again only to be swiftly silenced, but it builds again and again until this almost climactic moment, where you’re fully prepared to be swept away, given the euphoric release promised…and it drops once more to almost complete silence. The whole piece is a whirlwind of emotions. One of my professors said that they played this piece at JFK’s funeral.// And it so perfectly reflects the state of my soul right now—longing for peace, resolve, that eloquent resolution as the strings linger continuing the melancholic air. I listened to it several times this week after reading of yet another series of mass shootings and societies’ sudden awareness regarding sexual violence and oppression. And like with the song, my heart breaks…again.

And I know I’m not alone in this feeling—the feeling of being pushed and pulled and well, angsty…from it all. Because, that’s what happens when we allow ourselves to be open and vulnerable—we are raw and subject to the ebbs and flow of things occurring around us. It’s what happens when we get invested—but we aren’t allowed to just sit on our gifts, to be silent, complicit, disengaged from the world around us, because we live in this world—we are a part of this crazy, hauntingly beautiful creation God sung into being. We don’t have the liberty to bury our talents—literally or otherwise, because they are not ours to bury and forget about and let die. We also don’t have to and cannot do all of this alone.

Our talents which God has entrusted to us are our voices, our gifts, our prayers, and yes, our money.

And money is messy…and it makes me nervous; because I don’t know what to do with it. I was born a poor kid, and am still a scholarship student with 2 jobs to pay bills and live. Poor families aren’t taught how to properly address or use money, because we live pay check to pay check, making allowances each month, ping ponging between which bills get paid and which can wait another month without getting turned off or shut down. My mom, at one point, worked 3 jobs and still rocked that single mom life of 2 disobedient and crazy children. But, when we went to church, she still tithed—I would see her sneaking change, a quickly scribbled check into the offering plate every week. I never understood that as a child and teenager. She won’t talk about it any more than, “Amber, that’s what you’re supposed to do—even when we can’t, we must because none of this is mine and God has always been with us, and will remain with us tomorrow…I give as another service and witness to God’s goodness in our lives. It’s not a big deal.”

It’s not a big deal…

I tried taking that wisdom with me, finding balance and stewardship of the many facets of life. As an undergrad, I served and tithed with my time and energy—a very welcome service in a small and aging but still active church. But Stewardship is more than a singularity revolving around money and spending; it is responsibility with that which we’ve been given---our prayer lives, our breath, our words, our voice, our money, and our actions. *“His message was clear and unmistakable. God's grace is not to be hoarded but multiplied. Grateful service, not a frantic scrambling for security, is the proper response to God's enormous and entirely adequate gift of mercy.”—Wesley Bible Commentary*

This call to actively respond is not an individual issue, but a charge given to us as the body of Christ to grow in love with God and towards one another so that we may boldly claim the good news of Christ.

We must speak up, even if there’s dissention.

We must kneel, even if others look down upon us.

We must love those who persecute, even when we want to tear our hair out.

We must look one another in the eye, even when it leaves us uncomfortable.

We must not bury ourselves, even when we are afraid.

We must love as hard as we possibly can, even when we have nothing else to give.

We must give if we want a roof over the space where we gather, lights to see, and coffee!!

Greenland Hills is a place where we can gather in the midst of a crazy world, and of a crazy time within our denomination. The United Methodist Church is undergoing a type of theological identity crisis; but that’s not new. And Greenland Hills is being a faithful witness of their gifts, y’all aren’t shying away from others, your gifts, but empowering each others’ gifts! Your heart is so *so* beautiful.

You are made in the image of a creator God who sang and danced creation into being—who laughs and stars form, who opens Her hand and embraces us, who challenges us beyond our safe spaces so that we can work together and make more safe spaces for others, a God who sighs and encompasses our pain too deep for words, a God who doesn’t leave and return to collect, but walks with us as we stumble through—how much more blessed are we then the slaves in this parable? Our God, is a God of justice, and righteous anger, but not a spiteful Master, and we are no longer slaves as Paul writes, to sin but free through and in the Grace of God.

There was a Catholic Bishop in Brazil in the early 20th century named Dom Helder Camara who had a conversion experience while working with the poor; he said, “When I fed the poor they called me a saint. When I asked why they were poor, they called me a Communist.” Later, he wrote, “To walk alone is possible, but the good walker know that the great trip is life and it requires companions.”

We do require accountability buddies, companions to walk with us and grow along side, and live into the kingdom of God here on earth—and if you look around, in front of you, behind you, beside you…your companions are here. There are others, of course…especially as United Methodists, we are a global church, and as a Christian denomination, we are a global community of believers. But the companions and the community that walks beside you in your grief, your joy, who empowers and loves you to discover your gifts and talents, to educate and instruct you in the history of the Universal church and the history of Greenland Hills—these are the ones who walk with you through the difficult times, the easy times, and the meh times when life seems to plateau.

Thanks be to God. May we seek courage and strength for the journey with one another to not only grow more in love with God but to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world—may we begin with us, and may we continue together.