

Matthew 25: 14-30 — RSV

¹⁴“For it will be as when a man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted to them his property; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents,^(a) to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them; and he made five talents more. ¹⁷So also, he who had the two talents made two talents more. ¹⁸But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here I have made five talents more.’ ²¹His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²²And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here I have made two talents more.’ ²³His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has the ten talents. ²⁹For to every one who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ³⁰And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.’

The Parable of the Talents

The Responsibility of the Rabbit

Have you ever received a gift that turned out to be more of a responsibility than you may have expected? My aunt once gave me and my brothers a cute black and white rabbit. It was a sweet gift. We called it Peter for the longest time until we found out it was not a Peter but a Petra. We renamed her Buttercup. She lived out back in a hutch we built for her in our New York City neighborhood. However, taking care of Buttercup was a lot of work. Remembering to feed and clean her hutch was always difficult. The poor thing never went hungry, but I always felt guilty that she didn’t get enough attention or get out of her cage to explore. How do you let a rabbit loose to roam around in Queens? Once she did get loose and crossed our busy road and hid under a car until she was rescued by an older neighborhood kid. That was traumatic for both Buttercup and me. One

thing about Buttercup was that, quite different from other gifts I had received up until then, she was more of a responsibility than a playmate. It was a responsibility that I was not prepared for, nor did I fulfill it very well at all.

Setting of the Parable

The Gospel story today is allegorical. Jesus knows he is going to the cross and he tells a story about a man going on a long journey, so it appears that the man he is referring to himself. This man gathers his three servants. The man doesn't gather just anyone. These are his servants. The Greek word was "*doulos*" which could indicate either voluntary service (a servant) or involuntary service (a slave), but in this context it would be a voluntary. Other New Testament writers refer to their own service to Christ with the word *doulos*. So this allegory is dealing with those who have already dedicated their service to Jesus.

Talents

Next, the man entrusts his servants with large sums of money. A talent was a unit of weight. One talent would have been roughly valued at 6,000 denarius. A denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. So, one talent was worth about twenty years of employment for the average person. One talent was a ridiculously large sum, never mind two or five talents. The point is that it is a treasure. Our English word "talent" which we use to indicate proficiency at a skill or ability is taken from this parable. When we think of the ability of Michael Jordan to play basketball, we might indeed think of this type of talent as a treasure. What might the "talents" in this parable be indicative of, we may ask? The good news of the Gospel? The Holy Spirit which will be given to the apostles at Pentecost? The ability to heal and cast out demons that Jesus gave to the disciples when they went out to minister to people and spread the good news? This allegory is not specific, but we do have the sense that the talents, or treasure, is very valuable, and it is not just a story about money.

Action and Consequence

As the story progresses, we see what the servants do with their treasure. Two of them invest it so that it multiplies, while the third one buries it in the ground for safekeeping. When the man returns after a long time away, each servant gives back the loan along with their earnings. The man rewards the first two servants and punishes the third for being wicked and lazy.

Most of the attention at this point of the story goes towards the third servant who has nothing to show but the original talent he was given. He tells the man, **“I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground...”** (vs.24-25) I, for one, can sympathize with this guy. What has he done wrong? Was he given instructions to buy stock or start a business? Matthew doesn't tell us that. But here we see that there was an implicit expectation that the servant would do something with what he was given. He was not to be timid and bury what was given to him. I am reminded of Jesus' words in the Sermon On The Mount, **“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”** (Matt.5:14-16) We get the sense here that to hide one's treasure is not the safe way at all. Playing it safe and burying your talent is in fact a very dangerous thing to do. If your gift is from Christ, if you are one of his servants, you've been given a gift and now have a responsibility to do something with it. In J. B. Peterson's "The Message" translation of Matthew, Jesus says, **“It is criminal to live cautiously like that!”** Perhaps it is criminal to live in perpetual fear.

This brings me back to the first two servants, who were given the five and two talents. When they return their talents to the man, along with the interest, he says to them, **“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much.”** (25:23) It might surprise us nowadays that the reward for being responsible is not a vacation cruise in the Bahamas. It is not a luxury car or a bonus on the paycheck or a life of ease. The reward is more responsibility. Being faithful in smaller ways leads to greater trust and by that token, a closer relationship with Jesus. I get the sense that the message here is not about how much the servants earned with their investments, but the fact that they were courageous enough, or fearless enough, to go out and do something with it. That is our calling as well. We are not to be timid and bury our talents or hide our light. We are to invest our treasure that it may increase to God's glory.

Responsibility of the Talents

This principle applies to life in other ways too. Michael Jordan was undoubtedly gifted with incredible athletic abilities. But he was also known as an incredibly

hard working athlete, showing up early to practice and staying late and always pushing himself to be better. He is quoted as saying, "I don't do things half-heartedly. Because I know if I do, then I can expect half-hearted results." He invested his talents responsibly and as a result became an inspiration to countless young athletes and people of all ages.

As we prepare to celebrate the holy day of thanksgiving, I would like us to consider three things about thanksgiving, in light of our parable today, that we can apply to our lives.

1. Our lives are a both gift and a responsibility. We have been called into creation to live with as much courage and boldness as we can. We know our days are numbered in a sense. Psalm 90:12 offers the great prayer, asking God to, "**teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.**" However, this gift comes with responsibility. We cannot take our lives for granted.
2. Our gifts are a responsibility. Our talents, no matter what they may be are only valuable insofar as we invest them. We have received gifts of life, but also the gift of the good news, the gift of Emmanuel, God with us. This treasure truly becomes realized when we invest it, when we follow it and offer it to others.
3. We are called to live with courage, facing whatever fears we may have. Living under a cloud of fear and not letting our light shine is offensive to life. The third servant was afraid of missing the mark, of sinning, of getting things wrong. We can all rest assured that we will get things wrong. Make no mistake about that. Some of our "investments" will fail. The good news is that we are forgiven, so long as we don't burry our gifts because of fear, as long as we learn from our misses and correct our aim as we go. There is no excuse, however for not living boldly and investing our talents, or letting our light, shine.

Conclusion

Consider all the people, all that supported Michael Jordan to achieve what he did. There was playground in his neighborhood, a school gym, a university with coaches where he played. There was a support system that allowed all that to happen. Give thanks for the care and dedication that built these things that allowed such a talent to rise. His talent was nurtured by others who invested their talents.

Think about music and what a gift it is to play it. All that must happen to take a skill with an instrument and turn it into talent. Think about all the time and talent went towards building the instruments. Think about all those who built the stages and the venues. There are many hands that invest their work and their talents so that other talents may shine.

Think about all those who came before us to build this church. Not just the physical building, but the generations of people who carried the message of Christ, who held the light through the dark ages past. Not just Christians, but our Jewish brothers and sisters who kept their faith so that the Messiah might be born in their midst. We are inheritors of the gifts of many hands, many people who carried the light. Now that we have this gift, it is our responsibility to care for it, not by burying it, but by investing it. How are you doing this in your life? What gifts have you that may be magnified through your work and care, that may be given to those around you and to those will come after?

It is a wonder and a marvel, the gifts we have been given. Let us rejoice and give thanks by letting our lights shine to the glory of God.