

**Grace Episcopal Church of Galena, IL
November 16, 2014**

**Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Text – Matthew 25**

The parable I just read is commonly known as “The Parable of the Talents.” It is one of three final “Kingdom” parables in Matthew’s Gospel that Jesus told his followers immediately prior to entering Jerusalem for the final week before his arrest and crucifixion. It is preceded by last week’s story of the wise and foolish bridesmaids waiting with their oil lamps for the bridegroom, who was delayed. The foolish bridesmaids did not bring extra oil, and while they went off to replenish, the bridegroom arrived. They “missed the boat.” The last boat. And it was just too bad for them. They had not been ready.

The third is the familiar story of the king separating the sheep and the goats—the ones who fed the hungry, visited the imprisoned, clothed the naked, and welcomed the stranger.

And this middle one is a doozy. But, then, it is a parable. And parables are not straightforward. They are stories with many facets or layers. And, I suppose, if we get to the point where we believe we know precisely what it’s about, we are missing something.

It is, on the surface, about money. Lots and lots of money—a single talent is said to be worth 15 years of wages in Matthew’s time. Even the single talent is an absurd amount to leave with a slave, let alone five talents. Nevertheless, the fortune is left with these three slaves in different amounts. We are not told what they are to do with it—whether it is a gift, whether it is to cover expenses while the master is gone, or whether they are expected to increase it. The accounting that takes place when the master returns indicates the latter—there are rewards and punishments based on “performance.” The fortune was not a gift, after all, but a trust. And simply keeping the principal safe was not sufficient.

By far the most usual way this is preached is not strictly about cold cash, but also about talents as we think of them today—abilities, aptitudes, special capacities or advantages. God is the master who has left these with the servants (or us—or the church). And we are to do more than protect and save them for a rainy day. We are to use them, even risk them in order that they might have an impact and grow the Kingdom.

Think about it. The two slaves most likely took risks. They each doubled the fortune. One scholar of life in Palestine in ancient times reminds us that Jewish Law prohibited usury.

So, the maximum acceptable return on money was 12%. Now, one thing—maybe the only thing—I remember from business school and my economics classes is the “rule of 72.” The “rule of 72” determines what the interest rate must be to double the investment in a certain length of time, or, alternatively, how many years it takes at a given rate. At 12%, it is 6 years. We are not told how long the master stayed away, but it seems like 6 years would be a long time. So, if he was gone only 4 years, they would have earned 18%; 3 years, 24%; 2 years, 36%.

Now, if we put this parable in the context of the other two noted above, we might see that Jesus was instructing the disciples about their responsibilities when he was gone. And how they—and we—should live in the time before his promised return. We are, first, like the wise bridesmaids, to wait and to be prepared for this return, because we do not know when it will be. But we are not just to wait passively. This second parable tells us we are to use what resources we were given to increase the kingdom. And the third tells us how to do that—by caring for others, particularly the outcasts, the marginalized.

Now, this still leaves a lot of loose ends that I wonder about. If we are to see God as the master, just what kind of God goes away, is totally absent from us? What kind of God gives more to those who have and takes away from those who don't? Who does not give equally in the first place and then punishes the one with less ability to act accordingly? And doesn't this seem about earning rewards? The more you “perform” the more you get? Where is the grace in this? It sounds more like the Prosperity Gospel!

There is a more ironic understanding of the parable. One in which the master is not God but the Roman powers that be in 1st century Palestine, the empire, exploiting the people and lining their own pockets. In this reading, the 3rd slave who buried the treasure is not lazy. Not even fearful. Instead, he is the one who sees reality, who names it, calling the master “a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.” He is the whistle blower, the one who recognizes the emperor's new clothes for what they are. And he chooses not to play. He preserves exactly what he was given and returns it. No loss, but no gain. And talk about risk—he's thrown into outer darkness, or, perhaps, the darkness of being hated by all.

This, I think is a reading suited to a Bible study. Meshing it with the first seems difficult, if not impossible. I haven't found how to do it—at least not in a neat and tidy way. But, I do find it compelling—and as true in our time as it was then. As pertinent to the present economics as to ancient empires. So, parables are not neat and tidy. They are raggedy. And, as such, what are we, the people of Grace Episcopal Church, Diocese of Chicago, The Episcopal Church, formerly known as the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States or the Domestic to do with this? The “so what” question.

Our churches are challenged. Most have buildings to maintain. Paid staff. With declines in membership and/or changed demographics, there is not enough money to go around. Or at least not to fund church as we once knew it. People struggle with questions about what constitutes faithful stewardship of their resources. Sometimes, two groups emerge—one favoring maintaining and improving the bricks and mortar, the other feeling called to give away as much money as possible.

Here at Grace, with a historic building in keeping with our community and a desire to be vibrant, growing, and taking seriously the Gospel imperative to feed the hungry, care for the sick, welcome the stranger, we sometimes have hard decisions to make. These parables call us to act, to take risks, to live faithfully in this time using the resources to work toward God's kingdom. We are neither bury the treasure, keeping it safe and protected nor are we to hoard it all for ourselves while ignoring—or even exploiting--those in need.

Being faithful is not easy work. Every one of us is a steward of God's gifts. We are individually stewards of our resources, we are jointly stewards of the church's. After all, they are, to a large extent, one and the same. You have elected leaders in your Vestry and Treasurer, you have called a Rector, committees have been appointed to look after the various ministries. All are responsible to you, but also to God. We work hard to make the right choices. Is it good stewardship to keep our building in good repair and prevent it from crumbling away? Of course. But it is not good stewardship to make it a museum where its beauty and charm are more important than its being a place where people are formed and strengthened and where ministry happens. Is it good stewardship to properly invest our money? Yes, again. But with great discernment that building up great stores of wealth does not take precedence over vital ministry and mission.

Many of you still remember when Grace was a mission church. It wasn't all that long ago that it became a parish again after 70 some years of being unable to support itself. Some wise folk decided they didn't want to be in that situation ever again. So, they established an endowment that is currently invested with our Diocesan Foundation. It is meant to assure the perpetual viability of the Parish, so the operating rules specify that the principal cannot be tapped unless the diocesan bishop declares it to be "distressed." In addition, the approved uses of the earnings are specific. The dividends are not to be used for day-to-day operations. The practice has been to use the dividends for outreach because our operating budget, unlike many churches, does not include an allowance for outreach. Our appointed Endowment Committee keeps tabs on the investments and provides recommendations to the Vestry as to prudent management in line with the original purposes.

Other things that might be considered good stewardship might be certain capital improvements to our historic buildings. But, I do not believe it is good stewardship to cover deficits in the operating funds. Nor would it be good stewardship to ignore outreach

in favor of the buildings—or vice versa. It is a balancing act, and at the present time, we have been fortunate. We have not had to choose or debate what is the right thing to do. It is not a foregone conclusion such will continue.

There are expensive building repairs looming. The need in our world is great. And, perhaps, there are “talents” that we have that have been hidden. Talents that have not been used to the best advantage that would make a difference –that would allow us to share the Good News of Jesus Christ in a bigger, more effective way.

Our operating budget is almost entirely funded by donations—your pledges and/or gifts. This is how we pay for the heat and A/C, snow removal and lawn mowing, staff salaries and paper products, candles and communion wine, music and prayer books. Not very exciting stuff, but rather basic needs to support a church community.

I hope you have considered prayerfully what Grace Church means to you, what its ministries mean to this community, to the country, to the world. When we receive the offering today, please place your commitment cards in the plates. They will be dedicated for the ongoing life and ministry of this church.

I've learned at least one thing this week as I've wrestled with this text. Oh, it's not new knowledge, but I've seen it more clearly. What God has given us is not simply a gift that we are to use in any way we wish. It is a trust. I don't really believe that we will be judged with some kind of cut and dried checklist where what we have done or not done is computed into a score. But that one day I will be asked how I have used what I've received. "I gave you this. What have you used it? Tell me what you have done."

God is a generous and loving Creator who invites us and equips us to participate in the Kingdom. Will you accept? Thanks be to God.

Amen.