

Sermon – November 19, 2023

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Matthew 25 : 14 – 20

Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis, and he's well-known in pop culture for his work in interpreting the subconscious meaning of dream imagery. What does it mean if you keep having dreams of your teeth falling out, or... flying, or you keep seeing waterfalls or your mother in a bathing suit. For Freud the *images* we saw in dreams—and the choices of *words* we used when we were awake—had deeper *meaning* that pointed to some foundational truth in our subconscious.

Now Freud himself was intensely addicted to smoking cigars, and was rarely without one... which led to his famous (but probably *fictional*) quote, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Well, *Jesus* predated Freud by hundreds and hundreds of years, and predated *cigars* by nearly that much. But Jesus was a man of parables, of stories full of familiar and easy-to-recognize surface elements... that stood in for deeper truths. For Jesus a cigar was never *just* a cigar, and we do his parables a *disservice* when we let the surface details stop us from seeking the lesson Jesus *really* wants us to hear.

So here's the story Jesus told the people listening to him in our Scripture reading for today. A noble went away on a journey, and entrusted his slaves with some of his money while he was gone.

Our pew Bibles and many other translations use the word "talents" to refer to the amount of money the noble gave them. In the New Testament's original Greek, a **TA-lahn-tone** was a weight of silver that was worth multiple years' if not *decades'* pay to a simple laborer. So *five* **TA-lahn-ta** was like *seventy five years'* salary, just put in your hand. So, one slave got *five* talents, another slave got *two* talents, and the third slave got *one* talent. The noble went away for a long time... and when he came back he returned to the slaves to see what they'd done with his money since he'd been gone.

The first two slaves had worked smart *and* hard—and took some risks—and managed to *double* the amounts of money they had been entrusted with. The noble *took* it all from them, because it all belonged to him in the end, but he chose to *reward* both slaves with power and privilege—and further *responsibility*—to reflect their hard work.

But the *third* slave didn't trust his master; in fact, he was *afraid* of him, and what he might do if the slave lost all that wealth—all those years' salary—while he

was away. So the third slave *buried* the one talent he was given in the ground. In the end he *returned* that one talent—no more, no less—to the noble, who said, “Yeah, I *am* a hard man. I *do* expect a lot of you. But you didn’t have to *bury* it! You could have at *least* put it into a... savings account and gotten a little interest out of the bargain. Then we would have had *something* to show for it!”

So instead of *rewarding* the third slave like the others, he gives this guy’s one talent to *them*, for, as the noble sees it, “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.” And he banishes the slave that disappointed him into the “outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Now, at first blush, this parable can make us a little uncomfortable. Jesus seems to be aligning himself—or God—with a harsh slave-master, for one thing. For another, the one character who many of us might think of as the *responsible* one—the slave who didn’t take big *risks* with someone *else’s* money and just kept it safe—he gets *punished* by that slave-master in a way that’s sort of... existentially terrifying, right? “Outer darkness?” “Weeping and gnashing of teeth?”

And near the *end* of the parable, we get a line that sounds a lot like a “moral of the story,” which doesn’t really *fit* with the other lessons Jesus has been *teaching* up to this point. “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.”

So I want to address each of these... ingredients and points of tension, and explore *why* Jesus might have used them the way he did, all while getting to the heart of the matter—the lesson he wanted his listeners to take away from their encounter with this very real-life case-study.

See, it’s not a coincidence that *today* when we use the word “talents,” we mean “gifts.” Sometimes instead of saying someone is “talented,” we say they’re “gifted,” right? **In telling this parable, Jesus was trying to help his listeners understand the nature of the gifts God gives us, what God expects us to do with our gifts, and what happens to those gifts when you hide them away.**

Jesus was talking to *people*, normal everyday people, and he was using examples from their lives that they would recognize: masters, slaves, exile, and money. But Jesus wasn’t *actually* talking about any of those things. For Jesus, a cigar was *never* just a cigar.

A **TA-lahn-tone** used to be a measurement of *weight*, which eventually in *use* came to refer specifically to a weight of *currency*. Then over *time* it evolved to mean *anything* you could exchange for money—not only *physical* goods, but also skills or abilities. Then over *more* time... “talent” just came to mean what we mean by it today: our own inherent valuable skills. I say all that because when we look at this passage and see the word “talents,” it’s worth recognizing that our *interpretation* of *this* story didn’t *change* because the word *talent* changed over time... our word *talent* changed in *part* because of the way Jesus *used* it in *this* story to teach a deeper lesson.

Of the people hearing this story, some of them would *be* or would have once *been* slaves, and many of them would have at *least* known *someone* who’d had a master like the one in the parable, or *seen* someone have an experience like the one Jesus was talking about.

Some translations of the Bible use the word *servants* here, but I’ve been deliberately using the word *slaves*, because that’s what the Greek word—**DOO-loss**—really means.

In the time and place of Jesus, “slaves” were debtors or downtrodden individuals who sold their labor, their *will*, over to a master because it was the best option available to them to provide for themselves. This wasn’t the chattel slavery of the African Slave Trade that would come fourteen hundred years later; the inhuman atrocities of the slave trade we would one day engage in would have been unimaginable to the people of Jesus’ time. So when Jesus in other parts of the Bible calls *us* slaves of God, it didn’t mean “slaves” as we understand the term today, but people who had by absolute necessity given themselves over completely to the will of their master.

Now in this parable, a noble entrusts his slaves with a *huge* amount of riches. Which actually wasn’t unheard of. Jesus’ audience would have recognized the practice. A master didn’t expect a slave to run *off* with the riches, because he wasn’t considered a chained animal... he was a servant whose *will* was *bonded* to the master’s. Just as *Christians* we’re called to bond *ourselves* to *God’s* will.

In that case, the message of the parable is clear. Whatever God entrusts us with, we must make *use* of. Whether it’s the physical gifts of our life and our possessions, or it’s the spiritual gifts and “talents” God gives each of us, or even the gift of Christianity itself.

The things God loans us should be made *use* of, not hidden under a bushel. Because when we *do* something with the things God entrusts to us, they multiply, just like the money the noble gave his slaves. We use our gifts in the service of God, *doing* God's work in the world and among our fellow human beings... and the good multiplies. Lives change. The *world* changes.

But of course, then we get to the pieces of the parable that make us uncomfortable. The third slave in exile, living a life of separation and despair. The rich getting richer and taking from the poor to line their own pockets.

After all, this parable is coming from the same Jesus who said "the first shall be *last* and the last shall be *first*..." "the *meek* shall inherit the earth," and "what you do to the *least* of these you do to me." The same Jesus who says that it takes more work for a rich man to get into heaven than it does for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle. Yet at the end of our reading today, we hear the character with the highest standing in the parable basically say, "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." *That* doesn't sound like the kingdom of God! Not the one Jesus has been talking about.

But it *does* sound like *this* kingdom. The world we live in now; the same world they lived in two thousand years ago, where *money* is the God of the world, *power* is power, the rich get richer, and the poor are cast into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. That wasn't a "moral of the story" that Jesus or one of his disciples was tacking onto the end of the parable; you can just look at the quotation marks. These were words from the mouth of a slave-master, speaking a truth of the world that *any* slave would have been *uncomfortably* familiar with.

That's what Jesus did. He set his parables in the world his followers knew, with characters they would recognize, so that they could start to make sense of what he was trying to tell them. So when we reading this parable today chafe at the expectations of the master and the unfair treatment of the third slave, his *original* audience would have just been like, "Yeah, that's *life*. You don't get it right, you find yourself... alone in the dark without a *talent* to your name." The point of the story wasn't to celebrate the master, but to show how what happened to the third slave... is what happens to any of *us* when we bury our gifts in the sand. The third slave hid his gift away, and it languished there, risking nothing and gaining nothing.

Lying in a hospital bed, if you don't exercise and do your physical therapy, your muscles atrophy—they wither away. If we don't use the gifts God has given us, they *too* wither away and are lost. In the same way, the third slave lost *his* gift—his

talent—and in the end found himself alone, lost in despair, unable to *do* anything. In this parable Jesus tells us there's no religion without risk, and God can't do anything with a life that's closed off. If we're too afraid to risk the real-world consequences of failure... if we do *nothing*, our gifts wither and our relationship with God suffers.

The third slave was too *afraid* to risk displeasing a master he had only ever experienced as... hard and demanding. But the thing is, the master never *asked* him to *make* money. The master wanted them all to *take* some *risks* with these *incredible* gifts he had given them, come what may.

Talents weren't small, and neither are the *talents* God has given *you*. **So from this parable we hear God's call to *risk* using the gifts, talents, and powers God has given each of us... to further God's good will in this world. To *do* the good work of God, so that when Christ finally asks us what has come of the gifts we've been given... we can stand tall.**

What will *you* do with *your* gifts while the Master's gone? Thanks be to God.