

The One Talent! Don't Bury It! Matthew 25:14-30

"WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN THIS PARABLE?"

I'm sure you have heard the parable of the talent more than once. The typical interpretation of this parable is that God has given us talents depending on our abilities. So we have to work hard and be faithful stewards of our talents and bear fruit. When Christ comes back, the Lord will settle up with us and reward to those who have been trustworthy and punish those who have been lazy. Some best-selling televangelists misuse this text as a proof text for the promise of economic prosperity, saying, "Do your best with what you have, and you'll get rewarded."

But a close reading of the parable challenges these conventional interpretations. When we read the parable, we tend to identify ourselves with one of the characters. In this parable, there are four main characters: A master of the servants, who was going on a journey and entrusted a significant sum of money to his servants, servant 1, servant 2 and servant 3. But the difference between servant 1 and 2 is not really matter for the story, so technically, there are 3 main characters: The master, type A servants and type B servant.

"WHERE DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN THIS PARABLE?" We tend to think the master is Jesus Christ and the servants represent us. The Type A servants invested their money and doubled their master's investment whereas the Type B servant played it safe. He buried the money in the ground and on his master's return, he handed back the cash to his boss without loss. He said,

"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." (vs 24-25)

Of course, the master was furious and 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."

Have you found anything strange in this reading? The master admitted that he was a harsh man, who takes whatever he can wherever he can to make a profit. He even rebuked the servant for failing to invest his money with the bankers so that he might have gained interest. Earning interest by lending money is a common practice today, but this practice is strictly forbidden in the scripture. Exodus 22: 25 says "If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them." The master in the parable is a harsh, greedy and immoral man. He is willing to earn money at the expense of others but Jesus would never have acted in a manner to seek personal gain. Rather, Jesus scarified himself for the sake of others. So the master in the parable cannot be simply identified with Jesus.

How to Faithfully Wait for Jesus Christ

This is actually good news. Isn't it? The master we are waiting for is not a harsh and greedy man but Jesus Christ. If we deal with a ruthless, greedy boss, we have to invest and produce a return, otherwise, we will not receive a reward. But the master we are waiting for is not a harsh landlord but Jesus, who is the incarnation of God's love. In fact, entering into the kingdom of heaven is God's grace. We don't earn an entry ticket for God's kingdom as a reward

for our good works. Rather, we are saved by grace through faith and it's a gift of God. We don't have to be worried whether we are good enough to enter into the joy of our master. Unlike the harsh master in the parable, our Jesus has invited all people to his table.

Of course, this doesn't mean that being a type B servant is o.k. What strikes me the most in the parable is that the third servant was condemned, not for his ineffectiveness but for his "play-it-safe" approach to his task. The third servant admitted that he was afraid to lose the master's money. To protect himself, he buried the talent in the ground until his master's return. He did nothing. And that was his problem. Doing nothing is doing something! Instead of burying talents, we need to use them to follow our Christ and emulate his ministry of proclaiming the good news, feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least.

Our Lord Has Given All of Us Talents

God has given us talents. What amount of talents do we need to turn this world into the kingdom of heaven? Size doesn't matter. All we need is the willingness to use them for the ministry Jesus taught us.

In her poem, *Gate A-4*¹, Naomi Nye, an Arab-American and a writer, beautifully describes how a small act of kindness turned an airport terminal into the world she wants to live in. Her flight had been delayed four hours so she was wandering around the airport terminal. Then, she heard an announcement, saying "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Since Gate A-4 was her own gate, she went there. At the gate, she saw an older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress crumpled to the floor and wailing. The airline agent said, "please talk to her. What is her problem is? When we told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

So, Naomi put her arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. "The flight is not canceled but just delayed." When the woman heard words she understood, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been canceled entirely and she was on her way to El Paso for major medical treatment. Naomi said, "No, we're fine, you'll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let's call him." She called her son and spoke with him in English. Naomi told him that she would stay with his mother until they got on the plane and would sit next to her. Did Naomi do something extra ordinary? No! She just tried to help and used her small talent of broken Arabic. But this is not the end of the story.

After talking with her son at El Paso, they decided to call her other sons just for fun. Then, they called Naomi's father, who is a Palestinian immigrant. Her dad and the woman spoke for a while in Arabic and found out, they had ten shared friends. They made phone calls to Naomi's Palestinian friends one after another for two hours.

Do you know what happen next? The woman was laughing a lot and talking about her life, patting Naomi's knee and she pulled a sack of homemade cookies from her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. Amazingly, not a single woman declined one. Naomi wrote, "It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling." And then, the airline broke out free apple juice and two little girls from her flight ran around serving it. She wrote, "And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, /This is the world I want to live in. /The shared world. / Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. / They took the

¹ <https://poets.org/poem/gate-4> This part is the slight modification of her original writing.

cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too.” I believe that at that moment, people at the gate may experience a new reality, what we call, a peaceable kingdom of God. Naomi’s small act of kindness opened up the well of joy and celebration. Cookies, cool free apple juice and smiles of people from around the world! Those were enough to experience the kingdom of heaven at that moment.

One talent is enough to change the world. So don’t bury it! Age doesn’t matter. Whatever you have, that’s enough to realize the kingdom of heaven at the moment in this place.

I would like to share a video from Cami Webb who has started her environmental advocacy group. I want you to feel her passion and see the potential of her talent sharing for our community. (video)

I am glad that Asbury UMC has young visionary who would share their talents for our neighbors and nature. I pray that Asbury UMC can nurture many faithful Christians who is willing to share what they have for the ministry of Christ.

Take a Risk to Be Faithful Followers of Jesus Christ

In fact, we all are called to follow Jesus Christ by using our talents. Of course, using our talent can be risky. But “the greatest risk in life is to risk nothing.”² When members and financial resources of the church decline, the church easily turns to survival mode and tends to avoid potential risks. And change always involves risks. We know that our way moving forward is through transformation, through following our Christ. I believe God has already given us talents to build the kingdom of God.

Asbury mission committee is collecting beans, the ‘musical fruit’ that help us make a ‘joyful noise’ for our neighbors. Our Asbury outreach committee team has creatively come up with a virtual fundraising book party for 3rd grade kids. Our small library and prayer wall are small gestures that Asbury is willing to serve our community. Samantha Dorsey is planning to do VBS for kids. Thank you for sharing your talents and being willing to follow our Christ.

I believe we can go one step further. The Covid-19 pandemic has given us time to pause and think of what we are doing. I also believe that it’s time to plan for the future. Let us pray together and find ways we can use our talents to build God’s kingdom.

Don’t play it safe. Don’t worry about if we fail. But with faith, take risks to love and serve. Your talents matter! so don’t bury them. But share them.

Please think of your talents and pray about what you can do with them. Think of a concrete practice or action that you can do to share your talents with your neighbors and community. And put it into action. If you need help, please don’t hesitate to call me. We are one family in Christ, walking together as God also walks with us. Amen.

² RISKS by Janet Rand.