SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 25 (P28)

[RCL] Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Multiply the Gift

Our gospel reading continues this week with another parable, this time the parable of the talents In the first century, the Greek word talanton (τάλαντον) meant a unit of weight used for precious metals, and therefore a unit for reckoning very large sums of money. It's not just a coin that could get you a sack of flour. For example, a denarius, which was the Roman silver coin at the time, was a daily wage for a common laborer or soldier. A talent, gold or silver, was about 33 kg. Commonly, a talent was reckoned as about 6000 denarii. That means a talent is the equivalent of 6000 working days, roughly 16 years of labor.

Think about that? How much money is your annual salary times 16? I bet that's not a negligible amount. It's definitely more than a coin. So, even the slave that got only *one* talent, actually got a ridiculous amount of money.

We have then these three slaves, who are all entrusted with fortunes of different magnitudes. The one who gets the most doubles it; the one who gets considerably less also doubles it. And they both receive the same praise from the master, both are invited to step into their master's joy and will be entrusted with other things, because they have proved their trustworthiness.

The third slave receives this fortune, and, although it is a lot less than the other two, it is still a fortune. And he doesn't trust himself to do something good with it, so he buries it. Nothing good can come out of it when it is buried into the ground out of fear. When it is time for him to account to his master what he did with the talent, he blames the master for being harsh: "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.' 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? 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."

The master is saying that even if those things were true about him—and the slave thought him harsh—he could still have done something safe with the talent, something that held practically no risk of loss. But instead the slave chose to bury it.

Over the centuries we have lost the usage of the word talent for units of measure of fine metals. The word evolved to mean just what we now hear: special natural ability of aptitude. And that meaning actually

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derives from this parable. By the 15th century AD a talent meant a "gift committed to one for use and improvement". In many Christian traditions a "talent" is interpreted as a gift that God gives us that we must make use of and not keep it hidden.

And it is absolutely true that we should be confident and secure in the gifts given to us by God. But there is an important, small detail here in the story that can push us from this idea of individualistic importance and self-improvement to what actually makes the kingdom of God.

In his sermon on this text, John Chrysostom says: "For nothing is so pleasing to God, as to live for the common advantage. For this end God gave us speech, and hands, and feet, and strength of body, and mind, and understanding, that we might use all these things, both for our own salvation, and for our neighbor's advantage."

In other words, the gifts of God are never just about us as *individuals*. Yes, they are given *to* us, but they are not given only *for* us. The talents have to benefit the community. They have to benefit the whole Body of Christ.

Parables are wonderful, because they can be read in so many ways and they always have something to teach us. We can read this parable and hear a message about money, and that message would be true. We can read this parable and hear a message about our talents, our God-given gifts, and that message would be true… Now, what if this enormous fortune that is entrusted to each one of the slaves is love? Let's see what happens when we read it that way. One slave receives five enormous measures of love and immediately goes out and puts it out there and soon it doubles. The one that receives two measures does the same. They both double what they got. The love of God, shining through them, multiplied the love that exists in the world.

And the third one buried it in the ground. Didn't share it, didn't even hold on to it, but out of fear buried it into the ground, that it could not even be enjoyed by himself nor by others.

Seen in this light, the third slave doesn't come across as unsavvy and cautious, he comes across as selfish and afraid. He is closed off to the possibility of being in relationship. Instead of investing in community, he refuses to participate.

This is a useful way of reading this passage because it frees us from a vision of life as a constant self-improvement journey. God doesn't ask us to inventory our gifts and make sure we constantly optimize them. Instead, God asks us to be open to receiving this immense gift—this gift of love—and then using it. Spread it. Share it in community with generosity. What are we doing as Christians if we are not living into this love freely given to us by giving it freely to others in a way that multiplies the gift?

Because that is how love works, right?

In a worldly way, we tend to think that if we give something away, then we have *less* of it. That is certainly true of money. If someone gives you a hundred dollars, then they have a hundred dollars less than they had before.

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But love does not work like that. If we love another person well, we have not depleted some finite supply of love that we now need to replenish. And what's more: there is more love now in the world because that person will pass it along to those with whom they are in relationship. The person who receives that love now has love that they can share with someone else. Maybe they are more patient with their children. Maybe they welcome someone. Maybe they forgive.

And suddenly the love that we received from God and given to one person is moving through people we may never even meet.

That is a pretty extraordinary "return on an investment." We will never know what the final number is. We don't get to track how much good our love produced or how far it travelled. Only God knows that final tally.

Our work is to receive what God has given us and put it back into circulation. And in that way, an enormous fortune grows.

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