

Matthew 25:14-30: **Got Talent**
Highland Presbyterian Church, Louisville KY
C. Nolan Huizenga, 19 November 2023

When preachers start studying a scripture passage for an upcoming Sunday, we might check to see if we wrote a previous sermon or study paper on that text. Sometimes my earlier exploration of a scripture can inform a new sermon. Apparently I've previously avoided unpacking the parable you're about to hear. But I promised our Stewardship chair that we'd offer at least one sermon this fall that directly relates to stewardship. And this week's gospel text happens to be about economics. So Tim Daniel, this one's for you.

You might know the story we're about to hear as the Parable of the Talents. Our English word "talent" comes from the biblical Greek, where it meant a weighty amount of money.

Listen with me for God's word to us today from Matthew's gospel, chapter 25.

"For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.'

²⁶ 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? 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. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the

one with the ten talents. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Each talent here is worth a *lot*, like many times an annual income. So maybe we need to picture the enslaver entrusting the first slave with five huge investment accounts, giving the second slave two fully funded retirement accounts, and so on.

Sometimes talents are worth a lot in *our* world too. In 2006 media entrepreneur Simon Cowell started the *Got Talent* series of television shows. The idea was that anyone with a talent (music, dance, card tricks, anything) could compete with other folks before a panel of judges. After *America's Got Talent* and *Britain's Got Talent* each took off in popularity, at least 69 countries and regions have enjoyed their own versions of the show. *Mongolia's Got Talent*, for example.

A superficial reading of this parable might give us the impression that, like in those *Got Talent* shows, we're supposed to take our talents and compete to see who can win the most at the end. That's what the wealthy man in the parable seems to want from his slaves — that their work will amass even more riches for him. One commentary says that in this parable "the rich are still acting as they always have: stealing from the poor and rewarding those who help them do so."¹ In that scenario the third slave "is the only one in the story acting in a morally responsible way...because he refused to participate in the rapacious schemes of the master." But that greedy, harsh master cannot represent the God Jesus reveals, can he?

If like me you've wondered where God might be in this Parable of the Talents, consider this. Matthew has Jesus telling this parable during the last week of his life. Within days, Jesus' own actions will reveal that he's nothing like the wealthy, punitive enslaver. Nor is he like the two slaves amassing great profits with the master's money. On Golgotha under darkened skies, nailed to a cross by the empire, Jesus Christ joins the embodied love of God to all, like the "worthless" third slave, who are cast out, weeping, gnashing their teeth.

Before his death with the outcast, Jesus preached and fed and healed and he told parables. Parables are stories told for a purpose. What was Jesus' purpose here? This story comes in a sequence of parables about alertness, paying attention, being ready for the kingdom of God to break into our world at any hour, in any place. To make that point Jesus uses this story about economics as they existed in his world, with great disparity between the haves and the have-nots. Not that different from things in our world.

¹ Malina, Bruce J. and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. p. 385.

While I haven't preached on this parable before, it turns out that Megan has, and this week she shared with me some really helpful sentences. She said:

I think this parable should challenge us and make us uncomfortable. But it shouldn't make us uncomfortable about the character of God.... It should make us uncomfortable with our society.²

This week I read a *Washington Post* article called "How inheritance data secretly explains US inequality." Most Americans actually inherit zero generational wealth. Of the minority who do inherit something, white folks are three times more likely to inherit wealth than Blacks, Hispanics, or Asians. That in turn helps to explain why "the typical White [American] family has more than six times the net worth of the typical Black American family."³

And then in the next sentence today's parable showed up: "Up and down the demographic charts, it appears to be a case of to whom much is given...much more is given."⁴

Is that really what the kingdom of heaven looks like? I hope not. Note that the kingdom of heaven isn't mentioned in this parable. As Mary also challenged us last week concerning the Parable of the Bridesmaids, maybe these stories in Matthew 25 are meant to highlight for us how the world tends to work in contrast with what kind of people Jesus challenges his followers to become. Lots of scripture shows us that God judges people using very different criteria than the master in this story does. Next Sunday we'll hear the text right after this one, which includes the linchpin gospel verse, "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

While I went through seminary and the ordination process, I was under care of the Presbytery of the Cascades, comprising churches in parts of Oregon and Washington. I stay in touch with colleagues and friends out there, and this month they're telling an exciting story. I mentioned it to our session this week also.

After generations of faithful ministry, Laurelhurst Presbyterian Church closed in Portland, OR. Real estate is expensive there, so the church and property could be worth about \$4.5 million.

You might know that houselessness is a major challenge for the Portland area, and it turns out that Indigenous Americans are the most disproportionately represented among Portland's unhoused. For a couple years the presbytery there has joined with the Native American community and a local affordable housing initiative, all of them working toward establishing a tiny home community and early childhood center on the site of the former church. It will be called Barbie's Village, after a Native American woman who

² McCarty, Megan. Sermon on Matthew 25:14-30, September 2014.

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2023/11/10/inheritance-america-taxes-equality/>

⁴ Ibid.

experienced houselessness and had a vision to “create a safe place for Indigenous families with small children to begin their journey to collectively repair and heal from homelessness and the lasting impacts of colonization.”⁵

And two weeks ago at their November meeting the Presbytery of the Cascades, after much discussion, voted strongly to sell the Laurelhurst church property to the Indigenous-run collaborative for \$1.⁶ Here’s part of the presbytery’s statement:

As a regional governing body of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Presbytery of the Cascades is committed to participating in the reconciling works of Jesus Christ in the world. As an expression of this commitment, we are delighted to offer this gift of land as a way to tangibly participate in repair and healing alongside the indigenous community in our region. We celebrate the vision, hope, and mission of Barbie’s Village, and hope to be supportive long-term partners as their dream takes shape on this land.

The Presbytery of the Cascades found themselves with a talent: a stash of serious resources. And after discernment they chose neither to bury that talent in the ground, nor to pile up the wealthy with yet more wealth. Barbie’s Village, instead, shows the most faithful kind of stewardship: taking resources/money/talents and investing them where they are most needed. Not for profit, but for shoring up a vulnerable community, binding up the brokenhearted, making repair and healing possible where once there was exploitation.

This story is also a reminder of how even death and resurrection can foster justice: a mostly white church closed, and from that crisis creativity is bringing new life for many of Christ’s siblings of color unhoused on the streets of Portland.

I pray that our church and our presbytery may be as faithfully daring someday, as we pay attention to the opportunities around us.

And right now, for this day: friends, Highland’s got talent! As individuals and as families, many of us already have been handed five talents, or two, or one. Yes, in many cases I do mean money, though some of us here also struggle to stay afloat, and that’s an equally critical truth. To say “Highland’s got talent” also means we have a wealth of heart and of abilities. I’ve been here long enough to see what many of you offer faithfully to each other and to God’s beloved world.

Highland Presbyterian also has inherited talents from previous generations of the faithful. We have investments called the Legacy and Memorial Funds, which were created largely from bequests. Income generated by those funds contributes substantially to our church’s

⁵ https://www.underscore.news/reporting/barbies-village-is-portlands-latest-land-back-achievement?fbclid=IwAR2wkuNn6D92sd_HeS-ZyESrojilmvwPGcAfLK8ckTzAFw0Rwx07zi3JvVs

⁶ https://mcusercontent.com/aaeda2e9b65fb04a582f7f7fc/files/326d1fff-bf2a-5639-75e9-a57f33e69b8a/Yes_on_Laurelhurst.pdf

annual budget, and that puts us in an incredibly privileged situation compared to most churches.

But those gifts of the past cannot sustain all the needs of current ministry. If we wanted to try relying on only legacy funding, ministries would wither and half of us staff would have to leave. So much ongoing mission and care and worship and advocacy would be lost.

That's why each year Highland asks members and friends to pledge: so that all who currently worship and serve in this church are also invested stewards. So that together we encourage each other to faithfulness and love.

We pool our talents not to preserve the status quo, not to make the rich richer.

We pool our talents to serve Jesus who dares us to help transform this world so that grace abounds, the outcast experience abundance, rich and poor alike find their hearts on fire for justice, and the church might exhibit the kingdom of heaven to the world.

For those gospel purposes, I know Highland's got talent. Imagine the possibilities.

In the name of the Creator of all, Servant of all, and Sustainer of all.