

Matthew 25: 14-30
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14 "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."

The conclusion of Jesus' parable is a shock; it challenges our notions about Christian compassion and love.

To recap, a master entrusts three servants with different sums of money—each "according to his abilities". He departs, leaving them with no instruction. When he returns, two of the three have invested and doubled the amount given them. The master praises them and rewards them. The third, however, paralyzed by fear, has done nothing with the sum he received. Surprisingly, the master, who has been so generous with the first two, responds by condemning this man to eternal punishment "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

How do we reconcile the damning voice in this parable with the one who said: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth?"

Context is critical. Jesus taught the Beatitudes at the outset of his ministry. That was in Matthew 5. This is Matthew 25. Everything has changed. The cross is looming. Time is running out.

Our parable is the second in three allegories. Not merely straight-forward stories, they function on a symbolic level, evoking the end time, when God in Christ will return to reward the faithful and condemn the rest.

I don't believe in Hell—at least not Hell after death. Nor in God's Last Judgment. But it is clear that Matthew's community did. And they believed that the day of judgment was near.

We can hardly blame them. The signs were strong. Roman troops had violated, looted then **razed** the Temple—destroying the very home of God. The holy city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. And the Roman Empire continued to expand Eastward in triumph.

Besides, Jesus had clearly foretold the end time and judgment (Mt 16:27-28) “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Jesus' late first-century followers believed the promise that he would return within their lifetimes. Hence the urgency, the call to action. It was time to step up, courageously, boldly to take risks. With your soul and the souls of those you loved in the balance, tough love was in order. Each person needed to take responsibility for her own fate, the faithful use of her own gifts when she settled accounts with God.

In that light, looking again at the allegory, we can see that God (represented by the Master) is more than reasonable. At the outset he is generous and trusting. Indeed, "trust" is the key word in the story. The Master "entrusted" his property to the servants. He praised their performance as "trustworthy."

The Master's own trust was extraordinary! A 'talent' was a measure of weight, equaling 75 pounds! One estimate puts the value of a single talent—an ingot of silver or gold—at 6,000 denari. That's pay for 6,000 days of work—over 16 years. Five talents were worth much more than a lifetime's wages.

The Master was generous with the money **and** with his terms. He gave the servants money freely, without conditions. He left each man to decide how to use it. Their own choice. Their own responsibility.

If the 'talent' is a symbol for the wealth of love and gifts God has bestowed upon us, the story is about God's generosity and trust for us all. It is about the choice each of us makes to trust in God as well, to take risks for God's kingdom, to share the blessing of our gifts with others, rather than to condemn ourselves in fear.

God has endowed each of us with particular gifts, particular talents. And God calls each of us to use our gifts for the betterment of the world.

That's what Mauri Friestleben has done in the Minneapolis schools, as Kare 11 reported. She discovered her gift and passion for education by accident, when she began to teach to support herself and her child. Moving from classroom teaching to administration, as the assistant principal of Lucy Laney Community School she came

back to her home neighborhood on the Northside. It was far from a happy return. There she had been sexually abused as a child by neighbors. With courage to face her history, with trust in her God-given talents, she continued to grow. Now in her sixth year as Principal of the school, she knows that her experience of trauma and deprivation helps her relate to the children she serves and inspires—90% of whom live in poverty. "Through barriers and strongholds," she said, "I stood strongly on my faith....I strive to model for my students how odds can be beat, goals can be achieved, and perseverance can be rewarded." In each of the last three years, the children's test scores have improved.

When we use our gifts, we join with God and one another in the adventure of bringing the kingdom of justice and healing love to our world. If we bury our gifts, we fail to live into our heritage as God's children, bearers of God's love. And we live in a Hell of our own making.

These are fearful times. Every day brings more news of global instability and conflict, acts of violence in our own cities. Our national leaders cannot or will not act to help save us.

Meanwhile, humankind continues to despoil the Earth and imperil the future of life as we know it. Time is running out on the clock to reverse the effects of climate change. The signs are everywhere: savage storms, rising seas, increased carbon in the atmosphere, deforestation, declining fish populations and extinction of species. The deterioration is accelerating. We are creating Hell on earth for our children and ourselves. The responsibility for change is ours. It is time for courage, for trust, for risk.

First-century Christians were small communities of ordinary, apparently-powerless people scattered around the Roman Empire. With courage, with faith, with trust, they stepped up, they took risks, they used the gifts God had given them. And their movement changed the world forever.

Are we any less able than they? I think not. And the stakes are the highest imaginable.

Our gifts are made to be used, to be shared. That is how they grow. That is how we grow. That is how we live into the image of God.

St. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians, "there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit." Love is the Spirit underlying and empowering every gift. Love is the gift that every one of us can share. Healthy love is the gift that every one of us must strive to share, in radical care for one another and for all of creation—regardless of the risks.

