

Hespeler, 15 November 2020 © Scott McAndless

Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18, Psalm 90, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, Matthew 25:14-30

I have a simple question to ask you today. What is a talent? When you read that passage that we read this morning, Jesus' famous Parable of the Talents, and you read about the master giving to his servants a number of talents, what are you thinking about? I suspect that, a lot of the time, what people do think about is talents – I mean, the English word talents.

That's understandable, of course. We are reading the Bible in an English translation and we come across a word that is an obvious English word that we use all the time, the word talents, and of course that is what we think of. So, I suspect in many of our imaginations, we are seeing this master go up to one of his slaves and saying, "Here you go, I am going to give to you five talents. Here is a talent for playing the guitar. Here is a talent for break dancing, a talent for baking cakes, for doing tricks with a yoyo and for doing this really weird thing with your eyes. There you go, five talents." And then, in the same way the master gives two talents to do things to someone else, and one to another.

I think it's kind of inevitable that we, as English speakers, are going to read that kind of thing into the story. And so you will often get people interpreting and applying this parable to the whole matter of how we use whatever talents, skills and gifts we have as we go through life and maybe especially in the life of the church. We lament people who have talent and waste it. And sometimes I've even heard people use this parable to shame people into volunteering to do work or serve on committees in our churches.

And if that is what that word means, that would pretty much have to be exactly how we would read and apply this parable. But here is the thing, the word that appears in the Gospel of Matthew in this parable does not mean that. There is absolutely no sense in which, when Jesus said talent, he was referring to what we would call a talent. That word, talent, in the gospel is simply a Greek word that has been transliterated as *talent* in English. It is actually a huge coincidence that the ancient word that Jesus used sounded exactly like our modern English word talent.

A talent, in the ancient world, was simply a unit of money. Nothing more and nothing less. Just like we have dimes and quarters and loonies, they had shekels and drachma and talents. So the very first thing we need to realize as we read this parable, is that Jesus is talking about money. Now, that does not mean that the



way we often read this parable as applying to the question of how we make use of our talents, skills and abilities is totally illegitimate. I do believe that we will see that it can also apply to that. But any interpretation that we make of this parable really ought to take into account that it has to do with money.

But just knowing that a talent is money is really only the beginning of what you need to understand about this parable. You also need to know just how much money a talent was. If you were to read the footnote in your Bible, you will find a very helpful note. The footnote tells you that a talent was, in that world at that time, about the amount of money that an average worker could expect to earn over a period of 15 years. That is an enormous amount of money. Statistics Canada tells me that the average annual income for Canadians in 2019 was about \$54,000. Some earned more, some earned less, but if you average it out it works out to about that.

So, if an average Canadian worker took all of their pay for 15 years, gross pay before taxes, how much money would they have? Just over \$800,000. So basically, in this parable, Jesus was telling a story about a man who gave out solid metal coins to a bunch of his servants and each one was worth about \$800,000.

And to one of his servants, apparently, this man gave five talents. How much money in today's terms would that be? Just about \$4 million. Now, let me ask you, when was the last time you had somebody come up to you and hand you a check for \$4 million and say to you, "Take this money and do something with it?" I don't know about you, but that has never happened to me.

And that also raises the question, who has that kind of money to throw around, to give to other people and tell them to do something with it? The man in this parable clearly represents the very upper crust of people in that society, the kind of people that the people listening to Jesus tell the story would probably never even meet. And, what's more, I'm not even sure that it's the kind of person that you would want to meet because look how one of his servants describes him: "**Master,**" he says, "**I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed.**" This is not a nice person!

He is obviously filthy rich, but how did he get rich? Is he one of those people that we often like to admire? Is he a self-made millionaire, someone who pulled himself up by his own bootstraps, who worked hard and so, in some sense, seems very deserving of having such wealth? Clearly not. No, he got where he was by taking advantage of whoever he could as much as he possibly could. This is not even your John D. Rockefeller or Jeff Bezos kind of millionaire who, even if he is kind of greedy, at least is creating something that people in the community value. No, he is more of a Pablo Escobar, a man who is ruthlessly exploiting other people for the sole purpose of becoming obscenely wealthy.

So, once you understand what a talent is, you have to come to terms with the story that Jesus actually told. He told the story of an extremely wealthy and not very likable man – maybe a drug lord or a crime kingpin – who gives to his minions extraordinary amounts of money and expects them, without even bothering to pay them, to use that money and double it for the sole purpose of pleasing and enriching the boss.

And the punchline of the parable, the point that Jesus goes out of his way to underline, is this: **“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.”** Which is to say, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer and the middle class disappears, which is basically a commentary on the way that the economy works when everything is run by the Pablo Escobars and the Jeff Bezoses of this world.

That is the story that Jesus told and the kind of amazing thing is that he seems to have told it with the expectation that by reflecting on that story we would somehow find in it the meaning of the kingdom of heaven.

I’ll tell you where I don’t think the kingdom of heaven is found in this parable. I don’t think it is found in the figure of the cruel and exploitative master. I know that people have often assumed that that master is supposed to represent God, but I’m sorry, the God that I have come to know through Jesus Christ, is the very opposite of **“a harsh man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed.”**

Nor do I think that the kingdom of heaven is to be found in a system where **“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.”** That’s not the kingdom of heaven, that’s simply how this world generally works with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer.

So, if we can’t find the kingdom of heaven in those things, where can it be found? The only answer that I can suggest these days is to say that it is found in how we choose to live in this flawed world with its exploitative systems. A talent may be a unit of money but the story isn’t really about how to get more money. The Prophet Zephaniah says, **“Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’s wrath.”** Money, in the ultimate reckoning, has no value, so I think it’s safe to assume that the parable is not really about how to make more money.

Jesus has this strange habit of looking at how people – even bad people or foolish people – behave within the flawed systems of this world and finding even in them something that can teach us about the kingdom of heaven and I think that that is exactly what he is doing in this parable.

With that understood, I believe that the thing that sets the slave who receives the single talent apart from those who receive more has to do with fear. He, knowing that the world is unpredictable, knowing that powerful

people (like his master) are only out to exploit him, knowing that **“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,”** he responds out of fear. He can only think of holding onto and hiding whatever he has and not taking any risks with it.

There is a place for careful saving. There is a place for acting prudently and not taking unnecessary risks. He is, in my estimation, not condemned for any of those things but for simply being overtaken and acting solely out of fear.

The other servants took a chance. Yes, they did run the risk of losing everything, but at least they were willing to try something. They had just as much reason to be afraid as the servant with the one talent, maybe even more because they had more to lose. And make no mistake, their master would have punished them severely for that! But, whatever else they may have done wrong, they had at least not allowed fear to be their master.

And that is the lesson that I think we should all take from this parable. Yes, there is a place for prudence and safety, but if all our actions are controlled by fear, we will never discover the true power of the kingdom of heaven. That is a lesson that I would like all of us to seek to apply in this week that we begin together.

We all encounter fear as we go through life. And yes, there are some situations that we will wisely avoid because we are afraid. For example, when your fear tells you not to jump out of the airplane with a chute that doesn't work, a wise person listens. But fear should be more of a wise and faithful counsellor than a master. You need to have power over it so that it does not control you.

The kingdom of heaven is not built here on earth by those who always play it safe and never step out of their comfort zone. It will be built by those who take thoughtful risks. So this week, step out of that comfort zone of yours in some small way. Speak up in a situation where your fear tells you to keep silent. Make a contact that feels a bit risky to you. Put something on the line for the sake of something that really matters to you. And, yes, if you have a talent that God has given you that you have not used because you have been afraid of how people might react, by all means use that talent! We need to be willing to do those kinds of things both individually and as a church together. That is, I believe, how we will find the signs of the kingdom of heaven that Jesus was trying to show us by telling this parable.