

Sermon (11/19/17, Matthew 25: 14-30):

I was fresh out of Seminary serving my first church. As first years are for Pastors, it was more than a bit overwhelming. A year filled with firsts. First experience of needing to write a sermon every week. First baptism, first wedding, first funeral, first Consistory meeting, first Advent, first Lent, first Christmas, first Holy Week, first flood in the church basement, first parsonage where we couldn't open all the windows because the painter, who gave the church a really good deal, had painted the windows shut, first squirrel running loose in the church kitchen (boy that one really freaked me out), and first ominous looking deficit budget.

'Wow' I thought as I read the budget figures for a second time, 'I had no idea things were this bad!'

At the next Consistory meeting I suggested we needed a good stewardship program. What's a stewardship program? Someone asked. 'Oh my.' I thought.

Well, we did and one of the first texts we looked at was the one I read today-Jesus' parable about the talents. I was actually looking forward to it. My first study group at my first church. We had a pretty good crowd too. All seemed to be going well until I encountered another unexpected first-sometimes this Jesus really ticks people off.

People didn't like this parable one bit nor were they ready to give it much of a chance. "The Master is being totally unfair!" They insisted. "The poor third servant was just trying to do the right thing!"

I couldn't get a word in edge wise. By the time it was over, I felt beaten up and beaten down. So much for my first Stewardship program.

Exhausted and anxious to go home someone said to me on the way out, 'Pastor, let's do this again. This was fun.'

A very wealthy Master calls his servants together for a meeting before he leaves on a trip. Every indication is that he will be gone for a long time. To each servant he gives a huge sum of money. To the first servant he gives five talents, to the second he gives two, and to the third he gives one. A talent, back then, was equal to the amount an average worker would earn in 15 years. So, even for the servant who received only one talent, it was an unimaginable sum. Multiply that by two or five and we're

talking about a Powerball win or finding an original copy of a Leonardo Da Vinci painting! We're talking big bucks here!

What's interesting is that the Master gives the servants absolutely no instructions as to how the money is to be used. He handed them the talents and left. End of meeting. The screen door slams shut with a bang and the Master is gone.

With satchels bulging with cash, the servants go their separate ways. They were completely on their own in a world without a Fidelity or Merrill Lynch to help them manage this financial windfall.

The first guy takes his five talents and invests it. Not some of it but all of it and he does pretty well. In fact, he does amazingly well which surprises the heck out of us because, before this, he probably didn't have two nickels to rub together. Somehow, though, this guy doubles the worth of the five talents he received. I know what you're thinking, who's this guy's broker?

Apparently, the second guy found a good broker too because he also doubles the amount of money he had received from the Master.

The last servant takes a completely different tack. Scared to death of the Master, he buries his cash in the ground. He's not going to risk a single nickel of it for fear of the Master's retribution if he loses it.

The Master finally returns from his long trip. He asks the first servant, "Hey, remember that boat load of cash I gave you? I'm curious. What happened to it?"

The first servant steps out of the room for a bit and returns with a wheelbarrow, overflowing with gold coins. 'Well, Boss,' He proudly announces. 'I doubled it!'

The Master flips out. 'Well done!' He exclaims. 'Since you did so well with five talents, I'm going to give you a promotion, making you responsible for a whole lot more than that! Come and join me in my executive suite!'

The Master then turns to the second servant and the same thing happens. The servant has doubled the investment and the Master gives him greater responsibility too.

So, here we are-two for two. Two of the servants have done exactly

what the Master wanted them to do even though he had left them no instructions. Flying high with delight, the Master turns to the third servant.

‘Okay, my friend,’ the Master says, ‘You’re turn.’

Sheepishly the third servant explains that he was scared to death of the Master. He was afraid of what the Master would do if he lost a single cent, so he buried the talent in the ground. ‘Here it is,’ The third servant says, handing him a muddy satchel. ‘Count it. Every cent you gave me is there.’

The Master is furious. He takes away the satchel and gives it to the first servant. He then demotes the servant to the basement mail room where there is gnashing of teeth.

It really does seem kind of unfair, doesn’t it? It feels like the Master is being unreasonably harsh. I mean it wasn’t like the poor guy was trying to embezzle the money or pull a Bernie Madoff on the Master. He was just nervous about playing it fast and loose with someone else’s cash. I mean what would have happened if the first two servants had risked and lost all of the Master’s money? Who would have been the hero then?

Here’s the thing, though. The third servant’s paralysis was because he thought the Master was a mean and harsh boss. He was scared to death of the Master. Yet, there is no indication that the Master was like this. If anything, the Master feels more like Mr. Fessiwig from a Christmas Carol (if you’re not sure who that is you can come see the movie tonight). The kind of boss that everyone wants to work for. Generous to a fault, kindness that overflows, a fierce determination to allow the good news of Christmas to infiltrate every fiber of his being until it spills over into the lives of everyone he knows. To each of the servants the Master gave them an enormous sum of money. It was theirs to do with as they wished.

When the Master returns and hears what the first two servants did, his delight is in the fact that they boldly used the gifts. Taking chances, sure, but in such a way that they did it with the best intentions. Their reward for *using* the gift was greater responsibility. They were also invited to enter the joy of the Master, a kind of equality with the Master, or to use Jesus words, ‘I do not call you servants any longer...but I call you my friends’.

There is even the implication that the Master let the first two servants keep the money. The joy of the Master seems to be not so much about how much money they made for him but the fact that they used it. They used the gift! They dared to do the best they could with it. What would have happened if the first two servants ended up with nothing after investing the gift? To be honest, I think the Master would have still applauded them because what he cared about most is that they tried to use the gift courageously and with the best of intentions.

So, here's what I think about this passage. I think this is a tale about who knew the Master best and it's told by one who was about to risk everything for the sake of the Gospel. Shortly after this, Jesus would hand over his life, the biggest talent any of us has to invest. He would refute the world's violence, the world's greed, the world's selfishness, the world's cruelty by investing his life, everything he had, into a thing called grace. Talk about a risky investment! Would this investment of grace, made evident by the cross, really make a difference? It was a bold, courageous, and utterly foolish move but it turned out to be quite an incredible investment changing lives, penetrating hearts, moving even the most stubborn soul right down to this very day.

After Jesus' death, many woke up the next day feeling like an idiot for following a man who recklessly blew it with the gift the Master had given him but then came Easter morning.

So, you see, I think this is a parable about who knew the heart of the Master the best and it's such an important parable for us today. There are so many voices these days spewing such fear laden images of God. So many voices wanting to turn us into paralyzed, trembling in our boots third servants.

A few weeks ago, a number of us gathered in Chilton Hall to watch a movie about Martin Luther. In it there is this memorable scene where Luther is thrashing about on the floor of his Monk's cell, overcome with a heart stopping fear of God. He asks his mentor if anyone has ever dared to consider that God is unjust...creating imperfect human beings and then punitively judging them because they can't measure up. His Mentor tells Martin that this is not about God's harshness but about Martin being too

harsh on himself.

I don't know why it is, but it seems that these fear mongering voices are the ones that get the bullhorn these days, advocating a kind of third servant mentality. It wounds my heart every time I hear another politician talk this way or another religious extremist pound the table with an image of a smiting God. Why don't they give other voices equal time? It's a no wonder there are so many paralyzed, third servants out there. It's a no wonder there are so many folks running as far away from the church's door as they can get.

I think the first two servants got it right. They were the ones who understood the Master best. They were the ones who recognized just how incredibly valuable the Master's gift was, not unlike the gifts that you and I have been given. They understood that this gift was not meant to be hidden under a bushel or buried in the sand, but was meant to be invested in a world so sorely poverty stricken of grace. They understood it was meant to be used courageously, bravely, unabashedly so that every ear that heard, every eye that saw, every heart that received would know that in this Master's economy, even the smallest amount of shared, grace filled love will, at the very least, have a two-fold return. It's one investment that just can't go wrong.

To God alone be all the glory!