



The Parable of the Talents

Rev. Shada Sullivan

A Sermon delivered at the Church of the Holy City (Swedenborgian) in Wilmington, Delaware



December 2017

Readings

Matthew 25:13-30 (NRSV)

“For [the kingdom of God] is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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; 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’¹

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Emanuel Swedenborg, *Divine Love and Wisdom* §240

There are two abilities within us, gifts from the Lord, that distinguish us from animals. One ability is that we can discern what is true and what is good. This ability is called “rationality,” and is an ability of our discernment. The other ability is that we can do what is true and what is good. This ability is called “freedom,” and is an ability of our volition. Because of our rationality, we can think what we want to think, either in favor of God or against God, in favor of our neighbor or against our neighbor. We can also intend and do what we are thinking, or when we see something evil and are afraid of the penalty, can use our freedom to refrain from doing it. It is because of these two abilities that we are human and are distinguished from animals. These two abilities are gifts from the Lord within us. They come from him constantly and are never taken away, for if they were taken away, that would be the end of our humanity.²

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Love and Wisdom*. Translated by George F. Dole. West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 2002.

Today we are reading the second of three parables that Jesus relates to his disciples towards the end of the gospel of Matthew, about living in the space between Jesus' life and ministry, and the fulfillment of the kingdom. In this parable we hear a story of a master giving his servants differing amounts of money, five talents, two talents and one talent respectively, before he leaves for a time, without specific instructions about what to do with it. The first two servants invest the money and double the amount. The master is pleased. But the third servant, out of an abundance of caution, simply safeguards the amount and returns it to the master as is. The master is not pleased at all with this, and the servant, quite harshly we might think, is cast out into the darkness.

Traditional interpretations of this parable center around the idea that God gives gifts and we are to responsibly steward them. These gifts are not just monetary, they can be all kinds of gifts and abilities. In fact, the modern meaning of the word "talent" as in referring to a special ability or aptitude, evolved from the use of this parable. In antiquity, the talent, as we have already learned several weeks ago from the parable of the workers in the vineyard, was originally a unit of weight used for monetary purposes, and a big one too...worth about the same as a day laborer's wage for 15 years. The New International Version of the bible, which we read from today, most likely translates "talent" more generally as a "bag of gold" so that it more appropriately communicates Matthew's signature tendency towards hyperbole, which we are well used to by now. The master trusted his servants with an exorbitant amount of money. And likewise, the interpretations go, God entrusts each of us with sacred and immeasurable gifts that we should not be afraid to use for the purposes of the kingdom. There is nothing wrong with this interpretation, but I think that we can take things a little further.

Because as much as this story is about responsibility, and perhaps gratitude, it is also about fear. Narratively, we might well feel sympathy with the third servant because the story is certainly prompting us to. Surely we do not think he ought to be treated so badly simply because he decided to be cautious with something that was not his own? Burying the talent might sound strange to us now but in ancient times, burying something valuable was a common way to protect it. Wasn't the servant acting prudently, at the very least? Prudence, caution, these are important virtues. We all teach our children to look both ways before we cross the road, we all teach them to balance their checkbooks. So

how can prudence and caution be bad things? Well, prudence and caution can be bad things when action is instead what is needed. We all have our stories of chances not taken, apologies not given, tenderness not offered, conversations avoided. Isn't that one of the hardest parts of being a human being in the world, figuring out when to act and when not to act? The third servant in the parable seemed to be acting a great deal out of fear, fear for his own livelihood and reputation. And such fear for the external self is not usually a good measure of whether action is required.

The Swedenborgian interpretation opens up a further moral dimension: talents represent the knowledges of good and truth, they represent things we know, “riches of the mind.”³ The first and second servants double the amount that they were given, and this represents applying what we know in our natural lives to some good use, and receiving the equivalent growth and blessing in our spiritual lives. By this process, we enter into the joy of the master, we enter into conjunction with the Lord.

The third servant simply hid his treasure, which means he did not put his knowledge to good use. Specifically, the earth represents the natural mind, so the knowledge of the third servant was at most put into the service of external, worldly motives and goals, and so did not receive a spiritual return. And we must note, it is tempting for us to perhaps get tripped up by this word: knowledge. There are many different kinds of things we know: facts, skills, proficiencies. But this story isn't talking about facts, it is talking about knowledge of good and truth, which is basically just as it sounds — knowing about what is good and what is true. Suddenly this seems a little more close to home. It is not just about being willing to put the facts we know or the skills we have to use for the kingdom, this is about having the courage to take risks for the sake of what is good and what is true. We talked last week about the “moment of meeting” the moment of standing up and responding to God's call, standing up and responding with lamps full of the oil of love for when the bridegroom comes. Here today we hear about another kind of “formative moment,” when the master invites the servants to take control of some of his assets, to take responsibility for knowing something about what is good and what is true. And the question becomes: what do we do with that kind of knowledge? Will we have the courage to do good, brave, risky things, things that multiply good and truth in the world? Or will

³ Edward Craig Mitchell, *The Parables of the New Testament, Spiritually Unfolded*, 2nd Edition (Philadelphia, 1900), 154, accessed 11/13/17 <https://newchristianbiblestudy.org/bundles/ncsw/translation/parables-of-the-new-testament-explained-mitchell.pdf>

we decide to let things be, and bury our knowledge, along with our heads, in the sand.

Some scholars believe that this parable might have been directed at the religious leaders of the day, who Jesus criticized for keeping to the externals of the law, but ignoring the spirit of the law. Even though Jesus is now speaking to his disciples, we also know he had just been arguing with the Pharisees at length in the temple, and Jesus was astute enough to recognize that his disciples, who tried hard but often found themselves competing about two was the greatest...well, he knew that they would need to hear some of the same lessons as the Pharisees, they too would need to be cautioned against “interpret[ing] the law defensively in order to keep themselves pure and safe.”⁴

The disciples would need to be cautioned as well, because survival is a powerful human impulse. From our own little enclaves of purity and safety that we have all created for ourselves, it will always seem that the risks that God asks of us are too much, what is asked of us is too hard to accomplish, that our master is a “hard man.” We feel sympathy for the third servant to be under the employ of such a man, because taking risks, taking stands, can feel so scary. And yet, why did the master not seem so hard to the others? Surely the first two servants knew the master just as well. Are we to believe that they were heroes of some kind, extraordinarily brave and entrepreneurial types? Honestly, they don’t seem so bold as all that, just kind of matter of fact. They aren’t portrayed as heroes, just regular servants, regular people. Yet to them, the master was exceedingly generous. In this context, the third servant’s excuses sound more and more defensive. How often do we all blame others for our mistakes? I can’t tell you how many times I try to blame my children for ME losing my temper with them. I’m supposed to be the grown-up! And how quickly criticism from any quarter can give rise to a litany of excuses; “but this” and “but that” and “but you...” because the idea of failure feels so painful, and we cannot trust that God will bring us through it. The more defensive, the more self-oriented we are, the more we will act like the third servant, including seeing the Lord, and the path God calls us to, as unfair and impossible.

Think of the sexual abuse scandals that are going on right now, in the the fields of

⁴ Frederick Borsch, *Many Things in Parables: Extravagant Stories of New Community* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 106.

entertainment and politics. The events described in these cases are not necessarily current ones but rather, ones that are being uncovered from long ago. And the only reason that they remained hidden for so long is that the people who knew about it said nothing, or worse, actively covered it up. The people who had knowledge about what was happening, *and* knowledge that it was wrong, figuratively went and buried that knowledge in the ground. Why? Because the way that called for right action was perceived as being too “hard” just as the nature of the master was too “hard.” Please understand, that I am not talking about the victims here...such abuse always takes place in a differential of power, and it is not the responsibility of the abused to take a stand. I am talking about people who shared positions of power with the abusers, even if that is something as simple as shared gender, people who were “given” a special responsibility and a trust that comes with positions of power, just as the servants were given the talents. These people buried their conscience in the ground, over and over again, justifying to themselves that it was the right and safe thing to do for their own livelihood and career. Likewise, during the Civil Rights Era, Martin Luther King Jr, in his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail, criticized white moderates for their inaction.⁵ He had received a public letter from a group of Birmingham clergy, people who believed segregation was wrong, but also preferred to wait for some mythical perfect future time to enact change. They called King’s actions “unwise and untimely.” He wrote in response:

“We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was “well timed” in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.””⁶

⁵ Sermon Brainwave #570, *Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=948

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, April 16 1963, accessed 11/15/17 <http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html>

King could see that they were reacting defensively to the moment they were called to, they made excuses, believing culture too “hard” a ship to turn. They buried their talents, buried their knowledge of what was good and true, thinking that God would prefer a prudent course, projecting that hardness of heart and fear onto God, while countless of their countrymen and women suffered, and God suffered alongside.

It will probably never feel well-timed to do something we are afraid of, to take a risk that we do not relish. The self doesn't not want to relinquish its perceived safety, oh and how we guard that safety, how we guard and cherish our reputations and our appearance of success and having it all together. Just one look at the carefully curated personas on social media lays bare this compulsion.

But, Jesus tells us in the gospels, “Whoever would save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for me will find it.” In our text today “For whoever has more will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.” In earthly terms, this is unfair. In spiritual terms, it is about the natural generativeness and expansiveness of love. The more we risk for love, the more we *can* love. The more we risk for truth, the more clearly we can see. The more we bury ourselves and our consciences in the earth, the smaller and darker our worldview will become, the less we will see, the less we can love.

Our reading for today tells us that the Lord *lives* in our freedom and rationality, this space of between knowing and doing, God is present intimately with us there. God lives with us in the giving of the talent, and what we decide to do with it. But if fear for the self lives in this space, then it seems like there is no room left for God, it seems like God is a hard master who has left us alone. But this is not the case. We read:

“...the Lord's dwelling within us is more intimate as we use these abilities to open the higher levels. By opening them, we come into consciousness of higher levels of love and wisdom and

so come closer to the Lord. It makes sense, then, that as these levels are opened, we are in the Lord and the Lord is in us.⁷

These parables are about the fact that God is waiting too, hovering with us, anticipating for us, believing in us....ready to flow into any opening that we give....ready to turn our five talents into ten and our two talents into four...to turn our fear into love, our risk into growth, our “never” into now, our “wait” into “yes.”

Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

⁷ *Divine Love and Wisdom ; 240*