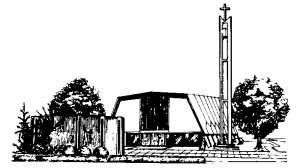


Campbell United Methodist Church

The Weekly Sermon



Practical Parables: *Making Good Use of What You Have*
Rev. Alan Jones
February 27, 2011
Matthew 25:14-30

So what's your pick for Best Picture for tonight's Oscars? I haven't seen them all, but I really thought that *The King's Speech* was not just a very good movie, but a truly great movie for several reasons. I also really liked *The Social Network*; a very well-made movie telling a powerful and significant story.

Part of the reason I like both of these movies is because they tell the story of a human being... two very different human beings, who discovered how the world could be changed significantly if they chose to risk, which I guess is the central theme of today's parable, the Parable of the Talents.

Do you see yourself as a person who risks easily? I suspect there aren't too many bungee-jumpers or mountain climbers here this morning... but do you risk in other areas of life?

I remember when I first came to Los Angeles in the 70s, a friend of mine strongly cautioned me not to take off-ramps from the Harbor freeway, as I would be held up at gun point. This was the very area, where, about a year later, I found myself living and working, and loving the energy of the community. I'm not sure how much I was aware of calculating a risk... I'm not sure it ever works quite like that. Just what is the mechanism of risk-taking?

The parable of the Talents comes right at the end of Matthew's gospel. It follows last week's parable about the Bridesmaids and precedes the famous parable of the sheep and the goats... *Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry, naked, sick or in prison?*

It is fairly clear what Matthew wants us to understand in this story. What is not so clear is the original intent of Jesus, and there is a question as to how the story was originally framed.

Let me get one specific item out of the way at the beginning. This has traditionally been called *The Parable of the Talents*. The reason for this name is the ancient measure of weight for precious metals, most likely silver in this case. One servant receives five Talents of silver, another two and the third one Talent. During the Middle Ages, as result of this story, the word "talent" came to mean a skill or proficiency in English, so the parable became a moral lesson in *use it or lose it*, with reference to the individual personal skills that you

have. Not a bad moral lesson, so if you need to hear that this morning, please use this story to develop whatever unrealized skills you have.

But please remember that, in this story, a talent is a precise weight of a precious metal.

Also, at the beginning of the story, I think it is helpful to spell out Matthew's understanding of the story. And, by the way, whatever you may have heard on *Jeopardy* this week, there is no reason to believe that the Matthew Jesus called to be a disciple, also named *Levi*, was the writer of the gospel. Levi was probably long deceased before Matthew wrote for his community, fifty years after the events of Holy Week. *Jeopardy's* Bible experts seem to be stuck with scholarship some time around the turn of the twentieth century.

Matthew uses the Parable of The Talents, along with the Parable of the Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats to provide us with a vivid picture of the end times. The end of the world is close. Jesus is coming back and you'd better be ready. So just as you have received God's grace generously, you need to be sharing that grace with a world in need. Don't hold onto faith for yourself. Don't bury it in your soul so that nobody knows about it. No! Invest it in the world around you so that you will see faith and the church grow, so that we may all be ready to receive Jesus when he comes. Be ready to risk, to be reckless if need be to ensure that the world knows about the salvation that Jesus Christ brings.

Again... this is not a bad interpretation. It is useful for us to hear, and especially Matthew's sense of urgency. *Get off the dime! Don't get caught up in your own stuff! Get out there and share the good news about Jesus! Some of you are better at this than others... so maximize the productivity in the process of evangelism. Everyone has a role to play, so if you don't get with the program, you'll be destined for Hell when Jesus returns.*

The world of Matthew's gospel and the community for which he was writing was a desperate and urgent time. Imperial Rome was behaving in particularly harsh ways. Jews and Christians were being persecuted, tortured and executed. They were dangerous, fearful times, and the good news about Jesus was literally a matter of life and death.

But let's go back to the story in the parable and look for clues of the original meaning for this story when it was spoken by Jesus.

The story tells of a man who is going on a journey. We hear nothing more about him. In Luke's gospel it is a royal man who is going on a journey *to get royal power for himself and then return*. Interestingly, though, in Luke's gospel, the amounts of money are only a fraction of the amounts in Matthew. Whether this man was royal or not, he was wealthy, because he gave large amounts to three slaves. Roughly, in today's money he gave 1 million dollars to one slave, \$400,000 to the second and \$100,000 to the third. He must have really trusted and liked these three guys, who were his slaves, otherwise he wouldn't have given them the money. It wasn't clear what the expectation was for when he came back, assuming, of course he survived the journey.

Several things to note here... He does not say, as he says in Luke, *Do business with these until I come back*. Nor does Luke include the words *each according to his ability*. The two gospel writers are setting up the story differently in order to communicate a different message.

It is interesting, by the way, that the master chose to give the money to three favorite slaves rather than entrusting the money to other members of his family. He must have had brothers, a wife, and children maybe? He chose slaves, who would have no particular reason to expect their master to be generous.

Then when he returns he expresses delight at the investment abilities of the first two slaves and rage at the fearfulness of the third. It is the third slave's unwillingness to risk that makes him angry... but I do hear ringing in my ears *each according to his ability*. Didn't the rich man know this man well enough to know that this would be the way he would behave? Why then is the punishment so severe?

So let's try our interpretation method that looks at all the characters in the story as different dimensions of our own personality. Which do you want to be? Where do you see yourself? The parable may be saying that within our own souls we experience confusion and have different characters at work.

A word of caution... please be aware that we are part of a culture whose norms were well expressed in the 1950s Western culture, which dangerously oversimplifies the realities of life. Most people are neither fully "goodies" nor "baddies." And you certainly can't tell who is who by the color of their clothes or the style of their hat. So be careful about rushing to judgment on various dimensions of yourself... all parts are to be cherished. The judgment on one character as *worthless*, who should be thrown *into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*, is a little extreme.

First there is the wealthy organizer, the central ordering part of our personality, that has received great gifts and is generous in sharing them, and wanting to see us blossom and grow... at the same time we sometimes appear to be a harsh person *reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed*.

Let me remind you that the wealthy man chose the three recipients of his *largesse*, *each according to his ability*. Did he maybe deliberately set up the third man to fail? I'd like to think not, but there are times when we seem to want to prove to ourselves that we are inadequate after all.

The two guys who make productive investments are clearly positive figures in this story. They work hard, make good business decisions and meet the expectations of their boss. If he had died on his journey, they would have ended up very wealthy and would have been able to buy their way out of slavery. I'm assuming that these were the kind of guys who took their vitamins and flossed their teeth daily.

In one version of the story, which didn't make it into the Bible, the second man takes the money and blows it on alcohol and women. It makes the story more colorful... I'm not sure which version is the original on the lips of Jesus.

The third man becomes the focus of the story. He is timid and excessively cautious. Putting your money under the mattress may give you a feeling of security, but it isn't going to improve the world or give you any real guarantee for the future. In days of inflation, you actually lose money by storing it, which may have been the case in this particular parable.

Speaking about this third man, our founder, John Wesley, says:

"So mere harmlessness, on which many build their hope of salvation, was the cause of his damnation!"

What words do you use to describe this character... lazy? Slothful? Fearful? Anxious? Cautious? Unimaginative? Passive?

Wesley is saying that many people build their hope for salvation on *harmlessness*...being a nice person. Often in memorial services I will hear people say *She never said anything negative about anybody*, and this is seen as a virtue.

We all have within us a fearful, harmless self who wants to hide whenever the going gets tough, and resists engaging the evil of the world around us. There is plenty of wealth to share, and the more we give, the more there will be. Jesus doesn't bring the economics of scarcity, but rather the economics of generosity.

The parable challenges us not to sit on the life of God in us. Like with the Bridesmaids we are challenged to keep our flame alight rather than allowing our narrow values to prevent us from keeping up with God's generosity.

God calls us to adventure and to risk for the sake of the love we know in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I think Jesus wanted us to see this parable as really being about God's life and power within us and not just about our own natural abilities. The appropriate response to God's grace in our lives is to allow God's investing hand to employ our abilities.

The tragedy is that often we are afraid of losing or endangering God and so, we seek to protect God from adventures, to resist attempts at radical inclusion that might compromise God's purity and holiness. Protecting God is a variant of not trusting God. Jesus wants his hearers to share God's adventure of inclusiveness. God is bigger than our limited religion. Ours is a God of endless grace and love... grace is the real capital worth having, love is true riches. We need to encourage ourselves and other people to stop putting God under the mattress. As we begin to trust allowing God to move through us, our lives change as individuals and our communities have a better chance to transform, find healing and grow.

So the plan is to keep all these guys in balance... to make sure that we know the relationships between our organizing wealthy self, our entrepreneurial inner slaves and our cautious timid self who wants to play safe and live the harmless life.

I have recently had to make a major investment in my car as result of gear box problems. I went to visit a friend of mine who works in a car dealership. As we went into the Service Department outer office we could both feel the tension in the room. A number of mechanics and service personnel were in the room, and you could feel the tension in the air. My friend told me that as the economy has become tighter and tighter and General Motors future has been in question he has seen people become less and less patient with each other, and the friendly atmosphere in the workplace has really suffered.

The world around us is increasingly stressed out, about many things. Our call is to stay focused in the grace and love of God we know in Jesus Christ, insisting on the ways of non-violent change, of justice, of peace, of mercy. This, Jesus is telling us, is the pathway to the Kingdom of Heaven. Thanks be to God.