

“The Talented Servants”

Good Grace, Good God, part 1

Matthew 25:14-30

[title slide] *Welcome, prayer.*

[phone] Back when we used to have a house phone, we got telemarketer calls all the time. You know them, although caller ID is making it harder for them to get to you. Telemarketers are usually not terribly polite, they don't ask if now is a good time, if we were in the middle of dinner...no, they immediately say, “Is Mr. Faulkner home?” Or worse, “Is Cate-jah home?” Without waiting for a response, they launch into a desperate pitch for whatever product or service that suddenly I must buy, or what critical fund has to be supported or something terrible is going to happen. Such fun.

Don't get me wrong. I know those people are just doing their jobs. And I try to be nice to them. I thank them for calling (sometimes) and ask them to take me off their list. Yes, there are incredible causes out there that need our support. I just wish they'd send me an email or a mailer and let me decide without calling.

[money, clock] Our money and our time are limited resources. We all choose how to spend them. Sometimes I look up at the clock, and it's 6:00 PM, and I wonder, “Where has all my time gone?” Or I reach into my wallet where I was sure I had some cash, and it's empty. Where did my money go? Did I use my resources wisely? There are times I have to admit, I could have done better. Have you lived there?

It's hard to keep the main thing the main thing. It's too easy to get distracted, and it's certainly tempting to just grab on to things tightly, especially our money, and cling to them because we are afraid of what may happen. What if I get sick? What if I lose my job? It seems our security is threatened constantly.

[Truth] How we use our time and resources comes down to one fundamental question: in whom do you trust? The truth I believe God wants us to hear today is this: It is not the size of your bank account that determines how generous you are; it is how much you trust God.

Take a look at our story today. Three servants were each given a portion of their master's wealth. He trusted them. It's right there in verse 14: “He entrusted them with his property.” The literal word is for bags of gold is “talents.” **[painter,**

musician] That word may sound familiar. We like to talk about people who are talented or gifted. They can cook, bake, sing, play guitar, paint, fix a flat tire in five minutes, sew a quilt, kick a soccer ball half a mile, type 60 words a minutes, etc.

[master and gold bags] However, the original word “talent” was actually both a weight and a quantity of gold. The play on words is intentional. These were very “talented” servants. They had gifts to spare. A talent of money is what you could earn if you worked for 20 years. Here’s another way to look at it. If you were loaned just one talent, it would take you at least 20 years to pay it back. Two talents would take 40 years, a whole career. Five talents? You’d have to work for 80 years. Has anyone here worked for eighty years? I haven’t.

A talent is like a million dollars today. Clearly this was more money than these servants could hope to earn in a lifetime, and the master trusted them with it. Talk about an investment risk! This is what the master did.

[The Story of Carrie, Harry, and Larry] I’m going to give these three servants arbitrary names this morning, Carrie, Harry, and Larry. Let’s say, Carrie got \$5 million, Harry, \$2 million, and Larry, \$1 million, give or take. So what did they do with all of that money?

Carrie rolled up her sleeves and got to work immediately. She invested, planted, harvested, and collected, and she doubled her investment into a cool ten million. Harry, not to be outdone, added some sweat equity to his two million and doubled it to four.

And then there was Larry, who, it turns out, didn’t like to invest. Or work. Or take any risks, actually. He took the money, \$1 million, hid it in his closet under a pile of dirty laundry, and just let it sit there.

[scripture] Here is what Carrie says when her master returned to settle accounts. “Master, you entrusted me with five talents. See I have gained five more.” Focus on those words for a moment. “You entrusted me.” Carrie knew what was happening. She knew her master had faith in her to do something with her gift. And it was reflected in what action she took. Under the confidence of the master’s encouragement, she went out and produced. Harry had the same attitude with the same results. Trust produced action, which produced a profit.

[Man digging hole] But what happened to Larry? Let’s get into his head for a moment. Pretend that was you. You know your master. You’ve probably spent years serving, watching, listening, and learning. Why would you hide the money?

My first thought is, Larry was scared. He probably made a bad investment before and still regretted that loss. That’s happened to a lot of us. So Larry thought he couldn’t afford to risk that again, especially not with his master’s money. So he buried it. At the time, he thought that was the safest thing to do.

[scripture v.24-25] Notice Larry’s response to his master. He didn’t say, “Master, you entrusted me.” No, he said, “Master, I knew you are a hard man.” Larry expected hardship, toughness, and aggressiveness from his master. And he couldn’t deal with it, so he returned the money exactly as it was, plus some dirty socks.

Did Larry expect to be rewarded? I doubt it. I think he expected the master to say, “Well, thanks for nothing,” and drop it. Larry wanted to be a wallflower. “Please don’t notice me. Here’s your stuff back; let me go back to work quietly.”

Even though this is a parable, a story illustrating a truth, I have a hard time reconciling this master with the loving, forgiving, grace-filled God I believe in. I find the master’s response to be quite harsh.

[scripture v.26-27] The master said, “You wicked, lazy servant!” Ouch! “So, you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed?” In essence, he’s saying, “That’s no excuse. You could have at least given it to someone who would know what to do with it.”

[scripture v.28-30] The scripture says Larry’s talent was “taken away.” Originally the talent was the property of his master. Why was it taken away, then? Check this out: The servants got to keep what they earned. In verses 21 and 23, the other servants were told to “come and share your master’s happiness.” They were included in the master’s fortune. What started as the master’s gift became theirs when they used it.

Larry’s gift was taken from him because he didn’t use it. Then he was thrown out to the “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Do you know what that means? It’s not the lions’ den. It’s a place of deep regret. “Arrgh! Should’a, would’a, could’a. Why did I do that?!” Have you been there?

[Jesus] If you’re paying attention to Jesus’ words, you realize, he is talking to us. We are the servants. Jesus is saying, “I’ve given you a lifetime, half a lifetime, a second chance lifetime of talent.” It doesn’t matter when you started to be a Christian or how much you possess. The moment you first said yes to Jesus, God lavished his grace and gifts on you in accordance with your ability.

We all have to decide whom we will trust. How we use our time, our money, and our talents should reflect what God thinks we can do, not just what we think we can do.

[Bag] This is our gut check. Will you use the gifts God has given you to build up God’s kingdom? Will you take risks? Because the fact is, it is a risk to invest in God’s kingdom. It is a risk to invest in God’s church. It is a risk to invest and support the ministry of Grace (Painesdale) United Methodist Church, to commit, to serve, and to make disciples of Jesus Christ to transform the world.

They say, “Past performance is not necessarily indicative of future results.” Sure, but the Christian Church been in business over 2000 years under the same management, and our “prophets” are out of this world! That’s a sound investment.

We have talent, all of us. We have resources, all of us. The choice is ours how to use them. Our church leaders set a goal of about \$2800 per Sunday to fully support God’s ministry in this community. To put it into perspective, if 50 families in this church, earning \$30,000 a year, all tithed, we would meet that goal and then some. The reality is, sometimes we make our goal; sometimes we don’t. But we all have a choice of what we will support and whom we will trust.

Remember, this isn’t about the status of your bank statement. Your generosity is determined by how much you trust God, not how much you have. The servants were given different amounts, but they were rewarded equally. The reason we say ten percent, a tithe, is a standard of giving, is because it’s different for everyone, and it is possible for everyone. And there will be some who give more than a tithe, and some who give less.

[Grace UMC] As for me, I believe our ministry is something worth my time and my money. Even if I wasn’t the pastor, I would still give this church ten percent of my income. Why? Not just because I like the heat being on in my office (although that’s really helpful when I’m writing my sermons!) I give

because I see people’s lives changed in this church. I see baptisms, weddings, funerals, bible studies, young and older people having conversations, sharing laughter, joys, and tears, and I don’t want a thing like money to stop the grace of God from going forth.

Church, we need to dream big. What unique opportunities has God given us with his resources? Will we support missionaries, community service projects, and disaster relief near and far? Will we continue to grow small groups? Will we continue to provide children and youth ministries? Those who already serve are willing to invest their resources in this church. They are our role models.

[Trust God] The truth is, God trusts us, a lot! Do we realize that? The generous God Almighty, who did not withhold his own Son, has given us more than we could ever hope to repay. God has given us the choice to risk it all in return, or to play it safe and hide. And as it turns out, “playing it safe” is not actually safe at all, it is the worst decision you could make.

Jesus never said what would happen if the servants had invested the money and lost it. But the master said he reaped where he did not sow. We also will not always witness the fruit of our investment. We may plant seeds that sprout after we are gone from this earth. Yet God’s kingdom is eternal. We are already reaping the harvest from what others have planted, and someone else will do the same after we are gone.

We’ve all been given talents and resources, each according to our ability. It’s not about the quantity; each faithful servant was given the same reward, sharing in their master’s happiness. This is all about trusting God and using our resources for God’s kingdom.

This parable brings into focus how much we trust God. It also highlights how much God trusts us. Is God’s trust well placed in you? I hope and pray that the way you use your money and resources shows everyone, including God himself, that that trust is well-placed, after all.

As I conclude this message, I want to give you a time to think about what God does through Grace (Painesdale) United Methodist Church. The ushers are going to pass out cards that ask one simple question: what do you love about our church? I will give you a few minutes now to fill them out. We will collect them during the time we receive communion.

Let's pray. (Remind them of the prayer wall)

Memory Verse:

2nd Corinthians 9:6b "Whoever sows generously will also reap generously."

Reflection Questions

1. What gifts and talents do you possess?
2. Have you shared those talents with the church? How?
3. How much do you think God trusts you?
4. Does the way you use your gifts and possessions reflect how much you trust God?
5. Have you committed to tithing or proportional giving? Why? If not, what would it take to start?