

“The Opportunity of a Life-Time”

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Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost – November 13, 2011

First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

GOSPEL READING: Matthew 25:1-13

“For it 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.’”

When I think about my life, several people come to mind who have had a major impact on my life, to bring me to where I am today. It’s a long list, in fact.

One person on the list is a man by the name of Tommy Gore, who was the first person to suggest to me that I think about going into ministry. I was a history major at the time, with my degree program well underway to be a history professor somewhere. But Tommy suggested to me that I take a class called, “Systematic Theology” and that I take Greek as my foreign language requirement. My life has never been the same since.

There is another name on the list, Harvey Floyd, who taught both Systematic Theology and Greek, the very classes Tommy suggested, and he made good on Tommy’s description of those classes and all the Greek and theology classes I took after those first two. My life has definitely not been the same after I received what I received from Harvey Floyd.

There is also Thomas McComiskey and John McRay, both of whom I met in Chicago and both of whom took a strong interest in me and gave me their time and advice and the benefit of their experience and education.

There is Lew Mudge, the Dean of McCormick Seminary, who all but insisted I get my seminary education at McCormick, and he opened the doors of the seminary and piled my arms high with both hospitality and generosity and, yes, a whole new world of theology. And, Oscar Hussell, the then-dean of Columbia Seminary, who matched Lew stride-for-stride when it came to piling my arms even higher with yet more Presbyterian hospitality and generosity.

Then there is also Rob Smith, who took a risk on me and gave me my first “real job” as a campus minister at Purdue University, and Mac Dauphin, who called from Birmingham and gave me a chance to learn ministry in the intense theological laboratory of Greater Birmingham, Alabama.

And then more recently, there are Milton Nesbitt, chair of the PNC of this church and Phil Leftwich, then-Executive Presbyterian of this presbytery, who gave me the opportunity to come home to the Presbyterian Church and to become the pastor of this church here in Pulaski.

So, here in the long shadow of Thanksgiving Day, you can already guess what I do every so often with each and all of these people.

That's right. I sit down, and I write them a letter that goes something like this:

"I hope you're happy that you have made my life such a heavy burden by charging into my life with all your heavy expectations and demands. Sheesh, if I had known that you were such a rude, inconsiderate, hard and demanding person, I would have never gotten within 100 yards of you. You told me to do things that I didn't want to do, and you have made my life miserable. If I could figure out how to go back and never to have met you, I would do it in a heartbeat."

You can see why I would do that, right? Surely you do.

But really, there is one person that every year, on or about December 9, that I make a point to find. And her name is Emma Armstrong Montgomery, and I look her in the face and I say to her every year, "I hope you're happy for ruining my life. I was a lonely and sad individual, when I met you, but little did I know just how hard and ruthless a taskmaster you really are. You insisted that I wear clean clothes, and eat good food, and have two children and live in an orderly house. Here's this blasted wedding ring you laid on me like a hangman's noose back in 1978. I'll gladly give it back to you, if you would just take it off my hands. Not that I think you will be that considerate."

Now all of you know Emma, so you must surely know why I would say those things to her—don't you? When you meet Emma the ruthlessness and cruelty are just so obvious, aren't they? She clearly terrifies dogs and small children...surely you can see that as clearly for yourselves as I do?

I think that line about Emma terrifying small children is about the same unbelievable "credibility gap" that exists between the one talent (talant!) man and the intention and motives of the man who puts his whole life's fortunes into the hands of three of his employees.

He intended it as a sign of deep trust and confidence.

Two of them were grateful for the opportunity.

One saw it only as a millstone around his neck, dragging him down into the depths of the sea.

And that leaves us to decide which decision we ourselves will make about the God who entrusts to us opportunity after opportunity for us to use what we receive in our lives—or not.

In the immediate context, Jesus himself is this great treasure in a very real sense. People listening to him are standing in the very presence of the promised Messiah and salvation of the world. They are given the opportunity to hear him, receive what they hear and do something with it in a way that will both express and further what Jesus is doing. And Jesus promises that rather than a religious burden, the Kingdom of heaven is about the experience of joy, now and in the world to come.

But human beings are quick to see God's gifts as nothing more than either inadequate or as bothersome. And the easiest thing to do with them would be to leave them where we find them. But for fear of looking too shameless in the eyes of God, we pick them up, take them home and then sneak out into the backyard and bury them. We don't exactly throw them away, because someone might spot them in the trash, or God might. But we aren't going to do much with them, because they would disturb our lives or cause changes in us or they would require us—and here is the thing, I suspect—to love something or someone more than we love ourselves.

This may be why we actually listen so strongly to the one-talent (talant!) man, to the point that the rest of the parable tends to disappear.

The man who owns everything puts his whole life's property into these three people's hands. And most people would say, "Man, he must really trust these guys."

Because here we need to do a little linguistic math about this word, "talent."

The Greek word here is "talant" with an "a". The Latin translation turns it into the word we know as "talent" with an "e". But the word here in Greek is a measure of weight. And a talant (with an "a") was anywhere from 35 lbs to, by the time of Jesus, something on the order of 130 lbs.

Which would mean that the 5-talant, the 2-talant and the 1-talant servants were actually being entrusted with massive sums of money.

I think if I told you that we would be handing out 130-pound-bags of money, your ears would perk up. We have an expression about “sacks and sacks of money,” or “stacks and stacks of money.” Well, that is the language of talents.

These people are not being handed a few pennies and expected to make a profit or avoid a loss. These people are being entrusted with stores or whole businesses or divisions of businesses. One estimate is that a talant might be equivalent to \$2 million today.

So, imagine being called in by a person who is running a large business or a large farming operation and being told that you are one of the three people who have been selected to run the operations while the owner is away. Now, we are in the math and language of “talants.”

This, I think, just might turn the numbers of 5, 2 and 1 on their heads, because I think I would actually appreciate only having to run one division of a major operation, and not 2, much less 5. I think I might consider myself fortunate to be able to focus on only 1 task.

But two of these people see this as an opportunity to use the “talants” they have to fulfill the trust of the owner in them in how they use the “talants”, the massive resources they have been given. Like when I was installed as the pastor of this church.

But one person, the one-talant person in all of us quite possibly, sees the gift of divine trust and calling as only something to be avoided, while trying not to look like we are avoiding it. It is like not coming to the wedding feast when the day comes, even though you got an invitation from a king or queen of Great Britain. Or, it is like only doing the socially acceptable minimum when you are invited to be a key participant in a once-in-a-life-time event of someone’s wedding. It is like Kierkegaard’s man walking backward while waving and saying to the people in front of him that he will see them soon. We look for back doors out of the room when God calls us into active service in the Kingdom of God, quite possibly because we fear it will be more trouble than it is worth to us.

Maybe the one-talant man was afraid of failing, so he hid what had been entrusted to him for fear that he would do something stupid and get in trouble for it.

But in the perspective of this parable, if we want to do something really stupid, then we cowtow to the fear of failure, to what a friend of mine calls the “internal stupid” that assaults us with the thoughts that we either are too stupid or will wind up feeling that way if we try to do more than just the minimum.

Entrust a person or a church with a sum of money, and it is likely that what will rise to the top of the ensuing discussions is trying to figure out how we “won’t do something stupid with it,” even more than trying to figure out how to do something faithful with it. It is just a fact of church life everywhere.

And with individual Christians, certainly the ones like me.

Maybe the one-talant man was irritated by the fact that he didn’t get as much responsibility as the other two, and if couldn’t be top dog, he didn’t want to run with the pack at all. So, maybe he was swollen up and pouty with envy, so he decided that if he couldn’t have it all, he didn’t want any.

Or maybe he was, as in the words of the owner, just flat lazy. He had always been watching to see whenever the owner was gone or out of sight, so that he could just sit down and “do his own thing” and not be bothered with the owner’s business, his instructions or his trust in him as his employee.

I don’t know.

But I do think that this parable is another stark picture of how easily and how often we human beings can and do resist the love and grace of God. We always expect God to be Pharaoh, to be wanting something from us, when, as in this parable, the only one putting money on the table is the owner, i.e., God. We are talking about using and spending not our own money, but God’s, in this parable. And in every financial decision we make with our faith at all awake and involved.

Somehow we human beings would rather be on our own, to not be “beholden” to anyone. I think we are sorely tempted to appear righteous and strong and independent, while also secretly prizing our stubbornness and self-centeredness, with our self-respect tied to the fact that we either don’t need anyone’s help or that one day we will get to that point, where we literally won’t even need to listen to anyone else.

Yikes! That would mean that the very Messiah of God could be among us—and we would find ways to avoid him as unnecessary for us—or as a bother to us. Which is exactly what Jesus is warning the hearers of that day not to lapse into doing.

But all those things we human beings prize—testy independence, self-achieved self-respect, a desire to be left alone and do things our own way, as we choose and when we choose, because no one can tell me

what to do—none of those things lead to mercy and love and fellowship, which are the very core of the Kingdom of God.

I can see the call of God as a bother and an intrusion, the arrival of a self-centered God in our midst, handing out assignments that we don't want or need. There are times I have done that, and sometimes I still do, when I am asked to take the treasures of grace and mercy that I have received and use them to help someone else.

But I can also see the gift of the Kingdom of God as...well, my life itself. The very reason I am here, the very reason we are all here. The Kingdom of God is not an encroachment on all my free time, but the very thing that makes me feel free at all, because I am free to be the person that I see Jesus calling me to be, enabling me to be, full of joy, confidence, faith, mercy and love, because God will provide all I need to do that.

When I was 7 years old, my father put me on a tractor by myself for the first time and told me to "ease the clutch out" as I started out with a sickle mower in a hayfield. I had sat with him on that same tractor for as long as I could remember, watching him make every shift, every adjustment, every move, every turn. In my mind, I imagined the day that I would be able to do just those things.

The Kingdom of God is about, by the time we reach Matthew 25, a group of people who have watched Jesus make all those moves, do all those marvelous things and then turn to them and say, "Now, it is your turn to join the party, to put your hand to the plow, to have your own hammer with your own name on it, or your own chef's hat with your own name on it—because God believes that we can do it, all with God's resources and God's help.

The one-talant man failed. It wasn't because he tried and failed. No, the one-talant man would have succeeded. All he had to do was to keep doing what he had long been doing while the owner was actually present. All three of these people knew what they needed to know—just keep doing what they did with the owner when the owner was with them. And if he had gotten into a hard spot, he had two other people to ask for help.

But like the older brother, the one-talant man had apparently been dreaming of the day he would finally be free of the owner and start his own operation, or just be free to do what he wanted. He actually got that opportunity when the owner left. But surely he missed the opportunity of a life-time—his life-time.

He missed all the fun and joy of seeing his own hands doing what they were skilled and gifted to do. He missed the joy of making decisions, of trying and of knowing it was never his own money at risk. He missed the joy like the joy of being a personal participant of something important and real and crucial to both heaven and earth. He missed, no, avoided and deliberately dodged...joy.

What he saw only as a bother was actually an invitation to feel joy in living and in loving.

I see that man in me, all too often, my friends.

Tell your fears of failure to pack their bags and hit the road. You never fail in anything done in God's name. Tell your "internal stupid" to pipe down and watch as the power of love eclipses all else, like the sun coming up and banishing the night. And tell your laziness to quit kidding itself into thinking that collapsing onto our own selfishness will lead us to joy. Joy comes from love and love comes from mercy, and all three come from the God who loves us, and seeks only to lead us into all three.

Dear friends, God has given us all life, and no matter how beaten or battered or tattered or shattered we may think our lives are...God still trust us with this life and trusts us with gifts that are meant to lift our faces from starting down at the ground or studying our shoes or our navel or our bad memories from the past. And these gifts open our eyes to the possibility of what can be done in God's name, big and small, as God's providence and Holy Spirit reveal it to us.

And our lives are meant to be lived in joy and to be led into it, because we are invited to the wedding feast, we are participants in wedding of the Bridegroom of heaven, we are people and a church gifted with both talents and talants—and God has given us each just the mix of gift and call that when we live life in God's name, it becomes impossible to tell the difference between the two. What we are given creates in us the excitement to use what we have been given. And what we are called to do is never a burden, because what God asks of us, God also gives to us.

That's a guaranteed opportunity of a life-time, with a life-time guarantee. That's pretty hard to beat. Let's not turn it down. Let's accept the gifts of joy, love and mercy—and use them to give what we have been given. Amen.