

# **You've got Talents**

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Matt 25: 14-30

It is a gift to be part of this congregation. When a hard passage of scripture comes up in the lectionary, it is great to have conversation partners like you. Because this parable of the talents is not as straightforward as we might hope. "Talents" here are a form of currency, not something people are really good at or display on a reality show. In our time and place, the whole basis of the parable — the master and slaves — is not acceptable nor is it well understood.

And of course, you know me; I get stuck with the fact that all the characters are male. So I am grateful for the chance to wrestle with the text, and I hope you will chime in with your questions and insights, if not during the response time, then with me or with each other later on.

In Matthew, Jesus begins his preaching career with the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, 7). As Anabaptists, the Sermon on the Mount is our favorite passage. And while we don't take most of the Bible literally we have tended to take this Matthew 5-7 to heart and actually try to live by it.

Our parable today comes near the end of a long Sermon on the Mount of Olives that Jesus gives close to the end of his ministry and life. As Anabaptists, we have spent less time with this final Sermon on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24-25). It is cryptic and apocalyptic, and not quite as easy to live out literally.

Jesus is a great storyteller and brilliant in his use of parables. The opportunities for multiple meanings and interpretations are exciting and confounding for disciples and critics alike. This final sermon is full of hard parables. The one of which we are most fond — that is perhaps easiest to understand, is the last one in Matthew 25. Some people feed, clothe, house and visit the stranger and some don't. And in doing so, they have fed, clothed, housed and visited the Christ, or not. But other things Jesus says in this last sermon are more confusing and ominous.

Last week, part of my quest to understand this parable took me to Lancaster, Pa. Driving into the downtown area, I passed Occupy Lancaster and then made my way to the Marriott. There I joined 80 Mennonite pastors and business leaders (Lauren Good was one) who were gathered for a seminar sponsored jointly by Mennonite Economic Development Associates and Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

The afternoon was spent wondering how business people and the church might work together better. What better way to start working together than to get a business person's point of view on this scripture? If we rename the master and slaves, call them boss and employees, this is a story about business, right?

After pondering this parable with several people, one business leader commented that he thinks the parable is about "developing capacity" and working up to one's abilities. Clearly the first two employees took what was given to them and turned it into more. They worked to their capacity and beyond. The third was afraid to take risks, was not working to capacity (or sadly maybe was working to capacity and there wasn't

much there). Burying the money seemed the safest and best thing, but this did not please the boss.

Another conversation partner suggested that maybe this parable can be likened to an annual performance review. The boss gives each employee a task that matches their abilities. The first two are clearly more capable and so are given more with which to work. The boss knows that the third worker is either not as capable or not as experienced or is just not as ready for the task at hand. So the third is not given as much to work with. The boss waits to see how these three do the assigned work and then fairly evaluates each of them.

I appreciate both of these ideas as ways to understand this parable. They help me to make some sense of what might be going on here. This is how the world works.

And yet is this really how God works? I have always heard this story told with the master as God and we disciples as the servants. Is that even our starting point?

Turning back to the text, Matthew includes another, very similar parable in this same Sermon on the Mount of Olives in chapter 24. Luke 19 has a parable that tracks even more closely to this one in Matthew though the ending is harsher.

Luke gives us a helpful clue in an introductory comment — *While the crowd was listening, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem where they thought the reign of God was about to appear.*

Does this mean that this is a parable about how the reign of God works? Or is it, as writer David Ewart says, **NOT** a "Kingdom" parable; but a "Wisdom" parable teaching

*us about the perils and difficulties of the ways of the world until the (reign of God) comes. (After all, the parable immediately preceding this one in Matthew is about preparation and waiting for the bridegroom.)*

Ewart argues that the first two slaves are willing to go along with the system. But the third slave rightly understands that the master has stolen, in order to get rich. The third slave refuses to go along with the scheming ways of the master. Ewart says this parable *warns us to continue to expect the rich to steal from the poor; and for the followers of Jesus to expect to be punished by the rich for behaving honorably.*<sup>1</sup>

So what if this parable is not about masters and slaves, since Jesus' disciples were neither masters nor slaves anyway? What if it is not even about how God works? What if this story is about how the world works? What if the story goes like this:

**Boss:** *I am heading out for my annual business trip, but before I go, I want to check in with you all to make sure you know what to do while I am gone.*

*Charlene, you are my top employee. I believe in you, I trust you. Take this \$5,000 for while I am gone.*

*Bruce, you do good work. Here is \$2,000. Take this while I am away.*

*(with a sigh) Pat, I am heading out for my annual trip. Here is \$1,000. Let's see what you can do with it.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.holytextures.com/2011/10/matthew-25-14-30-year-a-pentecost-november-13-november-19-proper-28-ordinary-33-sermon.html>

**Narrator:** So the boss leaves. Charlene, the go-getter, contemplates for a while what she should do with this large amount that the boss has given her. She takes her \$5,000 and doubles it.

Bruce, who is less experienced but striving to do good work, explores his options and invests the \$2,000 so that it becomes \$4,000.

Pat is a new employee and still trying to get a handle on this corporate culture. Pat is frankly scared of the boss and doesn't have much imagination when it comes to money, investments or even asking for help. Pat decides that given the situation, the safest thing to do is to do the sure thing, put the money under the mattress, check on it each day and make sure it is there for the boss at the end of the trip.

The trip is long; the boss has money to spend and investments to check on, all over the world. Upon return, the boss is more than curious to see how things went in the home office.

Charlene comes forward with her report. She was given \$5,000 and through careful and shrewd investing she is able to give the boss \$10,000 in return. The boss is thrilled.

**Boss:** I knew you could do it. You have been faithful and wise with what I gave you. I am promoting you so that you will have your own home office. Come to the big office bash. Come, enjoy yourself with me.

**Narrator:** Bruce comes forward with his earnings. Through attentiveness Bruce's \$2,000 has become \$4,000. The boss is pleased.

**Boss:** *Well, look who has really made strides. Way to go. Looks like you are ready for more responsibility here. Do join us for the big office bash. Come, enjoy yourself with me.*

**Narrator:** *And then Pat, reluctantly steps up.*

**Pat:** *“It has been hard for me to figure out how things work around here. I know that you sometimes cheat and that you steal, so I was really scared of what might happen to what you gave me. I took very good care of it for you. And here it is, \$1,000, clean and spotless.”*

**Narrator:** *Then the boss loses it. Maybe it is jetlag, maybe it is greed.*

**Boss:** *“Are you kidding me? You are new here and yet I trust you with a \$1,000 and all you do is keep it clean? And who are you to tell me how to run my business? You think that I cheat and steal? If you don’t trust me, you could at least put the \$1,000 in the bank and make 1 percent. Charlene, take this \$1,000 and work your magic with it.*

*“Now you see how it works in the business world. Those who have will get more and more. And those who don’t have much will lose even the little that they have. Bruce, fire Pat. I don’t want to see that sorry one in my office and certainly not at the big office bash. Let Pat see what unemployment is like. Now there will be crying and teeth grinding.”*

Is this really a story of the reign of God? The rich get richer and the poor get poorer? How does that line up with Mary’s Magnificat “the mighty are brought low and

the lowly are raised to high places?” How does this square with “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” What about “love your neighbor as yourself?”

Or is this a wisdom parable, a warning about what the waiting will be like? **Is Pat** a lazy lout? Or is Pat, the third employee, the real hero? Is Pat the one who sees right through the corruption of the boss, the other two employees and the whole system? How **can** someone double their investment this way unless the boss’ trip is really, really long?

As George Hermanson understands it, Pat is a “whistle-blower.” Pat is public in refusing to cooperate with the boss’ methods, and draws attention to the injustice that has come to be seen as “business as usual.”

The act of storing the \$1,000 under the mattress is classic non-violent resistance: Pat harms no one, but publicly refuses to participate in the unjust system of acquiring wealth for the few by impoverishing the many.<sup>2</sup>

Reading this as a parable of the reign of God is disturbing because we have God throwing Pat into the outer darkness. But if we take a different angle — that this is a story of what it is like to wait for the reign of God in the midst of corruption — then perhaps in the end Pat isn’t so bad off. Pat is no longer enslaved to the oppressive system. Now there is freedom. The place of teeth grinding and wailing may only look that way to those who hold tightly to power. Maybe the place of crying and gnashing of teeth is only a projection of what those who hold power most fear.

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Is there freedom outside the domination system? Is there hope for Pat now that the injustice has been named? The "Occupy" movement would say "yes, maybe." To those who hold the money and the power, Occupy Wall Street (or DC or Oakland or Nova Scotia) looks like a bunch of people with nothing better to do than to sleep on the streets, utterly dependent on others for food and other necessities.

But there is something else going on. In the midst of the protest of power run amok there is real community springing up, literally, outside the traditional, institutional structures. Home grown organization is giving new life and voice to those who felt alone and ignored. People are finding meaning in non-violent action, in being part of creating something no matter how nebulous it may seem to outsiders. There seems to be joy in being part of a local community and something larger than themselves. It looks as if people all over the world are hungry for that, even in Lancaster Pa.

Maybe the parable of the talents has more to tell us than we have ever known. Maybe it is a lesson in stewardship. And a story about working up to our potential. And a tale of speaking truth to power and refusing to cooperate with oppression.

May we use our gifts wisely and be given courage to stand with the oppressed as we work for the coming reign of God.