

## “Timidity”<sup>i</sup>

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Matthew 25:14-30

<sup>14</sup>“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>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.’ <sup>21</sup>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.’ <sup>22</sup>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.’ <sup>23</sup>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.’ <sup>24</sup>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; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup>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? <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

When we read Matthew’s gospel account, we find that the writer regularly spoke of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” But what’s with this parable? To those who have, more will be given, but even the little that the others have will be taken away?!

We have been conditioned since childhood to think of Jesus’ parables as stories about God. So we might assume that the wealthy man, let’s call him Mr. Gray, represents God. Mr. Gray assigns certain of his possessions to each of three slaves before he goes on a trip. Ok, we think, maybe this is describing after Jesus leaves his disciples. But then we get to verse 24 where the third slave, we’ll call him Sol explains, “‘Master, I knew that you are a hard man. You harvest grain where you haven’t sown. You gather crops where you haven’t spread seed. So I was afraid.”

I was afraid. Can you imagine Jesus telling a story in which the main character is *afraid of God*? No, that can’t be. When I first put my sermon plan together, I wrongly thought that Sol was an introvert. Maybe he was; maybe not. We don’t know and it doesn’t matter. What we do know is that this person did not have the business acumen of his fellow slaves. More than that, he was nervous. He was anxious. He lacked self-confidence. He was frightened.

Sol knew that Mr. Gray was harsh man. And that the world of business was full of snares. What if he invested the money and lost some of it? All of it? What then? Can you imagine this man, incapacitated by his master’s expectation? Unable to do the clever thing, he did the safe thing. He buried the money to keep it safe. Sol may have been proud of himself. He’s used to things going badly – often through no fault of his own, but this time, he has succeeded. Not one penny has been lost.

We can feel compassion for this man. His life can’t have been easy. Like most of us, he’d never been the best, the fastest, or the smartest. There was nothing wrong with that or with him. He was simply being cautious. He could not take the risk.

Do you know anyone like this? Any of us can struggle with a decision once in a while, but some live in fear, incapacitated by the struggle to do anything. Making decisions can literally make them ill. As a result, they live a half-life, avoiding anything that might threaten their slim peace.

Jesus is a caring teacher but in this instance, he shows his practical side as he describes life – as it really is and not as we might wish it to be. “Use it or lose it,” he tells his students. Much as we might like for life to work differently, this is how life works.

So, Mr. Gray does not represent God. God is present – as God always is – but in this particular story God’s presence is assumed rather than actually visible. As for Sol – cautious, one-talent Sol – he’s the villain of this story. “Villain” because he did not use what he had.

Jesus acknowledges that life is not always fair. Some have a lot and get even more. Others barely get by. No, life isn’t fair. Yet, Jesus reminds us, we still need to do what we can with what we are given.

Many people play the piano better than Kellyn does but she still plays, because it gives her, and the ones around her, pleasure. It’s the right thing for her. Jim is a rather average guy who tithes to his local church. It doesn’t add up to much all by itself, but it’s the right thing for him and he trusts that combined with other people’s giving, his church can do good work for God’s kingdom. As a nurse, Marcia knows that her work benefited many people. Both this healing ministry and her singing in the choir are part of how she shares her gift. Our gifts can include skills and talents that we use in leisure as well as the ones that are marketable. Between us, we have what is needed to care for God’s world and all who are in it. We’re each called to use our gifts for our own joy and for the betterment of God’s creation.

Yet there is another gift that’s particularly valuable. This gift is life itself. Nothing compares with the value of this life God gives us. Just as Mr. Gray in our parable put no restrictions on how each slave was to use their gift, God puts no restrictions on how we are to live this life. We receive the gift, a precious treasure, and it’s up to us what we do with it.

This treasure is not the same for all of us yet we all receive it. Sadly, many people never realize what a treasure life is. In wonderful or terrible moments, we will sometimes get a glimpse of its value but most of the time, we simply live, with no thought for the bigger picture. Yet, the big picture’s still there. God gives us a gift, a pearl of great worth – body and breath, a mind. And God infuses us with the presence of the Holy Spirit. We truly are “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

Then, God calls us to live, today, abundantly, to live as if life is the best present we have or will ever receive.

It’s only when we let life slip by us, when we hide our light under a basket instead of letting it shine through all that we do, only then is there any “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” At the end of a life not lived. I think of the story of a boy who never learned to enjoy this gift of life.

Peter could never live in the moment. When he was in school, he dreamed of being outside playing. When he was outside, he dreamed of summer vacation. Always daydreaming, Peter never took the time to savor the moments of his life.

One hot afternoon in the woods near his home, he grew sleepy and lay down. When he heard someone calling his name, he sat up. There was an old woman holding a silver ball, from which dangled a silken golden thread.

“Peter,” she said, “this is the thread of your life. If you pull just a bit, an hour will pass like a second. Pull harder, and whole days will pass. But I warn you, once you pull the thread, it cannot be pushed back in again. It will disappear like a puff of smoke. Do you want it?” Peter seized the gift joyfully, put the ball in his pocket and ran home.

The next day, feeling restless and bored at school, he remembered the ball. He pulled just bit of the golden thread and found himself outside playing.

Realizing the power of this new toy, Peter grew tired of being a schoolboy. He longed to be a teenager, with all the excitement that would bring. So he held the ball and pulled hard on the thread. Suddenly, he was a teenager with a girlfriend named Elise. But Peter still wasn’t content.

You can see how this is going... I’ll stop there. You can find the story online if you want to learn how it ends.

I'm planning to have no stewardship sermon series this year. No three or four weeks when all we talk about is money, time, and the gifts we've been given – and how we share them. Instead, now and again we'll talk about such things as they come up. Does that sound okay?

Today, we remind ourselves that God gives us this life hoping that we'll use it well. Hoping that we'll nurture the ones closest to us and draw the ones who are outside the circle into the circle. Hoping that we'll celebrate this gift on our own, with loved ones and even with those we don't know.

So I ask you, are you living your life in ways that you can one day look back on and say, "I lived the life God intended and it was a good life!"? If you are, then by all means, keep it up. But if your answer is "no," then this week maybe you can think of one thing you can do differently to get closer on track with that life.

God wants the best life for all of God's creation. But it's up to us to make sure we're actually living it.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Source material: J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables from the Back Side: Bible Stories with a Twist*, (Abingdon, Nashville, 1991), 26-31.