

Matthew 25:14-30
The Parable of the Talents
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*Start this video as soon as the scripture reading is finished.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vShRRBhHLJI>

“Jock’s Song”

*Four steps a straight, then to my left
And right at the place where I marked it
With a bonnie, bonnie bone, I’ll bury for me own
In the bonnie, bonnie bank in the backyard.*

Dog’s bury food, bones, toys...I’ve been told some dogs bury their owner’s belongings, like car keys, as well. There was a Doritos commercial a few years back that picked up on this idea.

*Play only the first 30 seconds.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZjPPJu6PsA>

(Stop at 30 seconds)

*Our dog, our precious, furry angel, tries to bury treats that we give him, but only the ones that he finds irresistibly delicious. He will tuck the treat between couch cushions, under blankets on beds, and anywhere else he thinks it will be safe. He can never leave the treat wherever he puts it though. We laugh that he thinks we can’t be trusted. He always ends up just eating the treat, rather than saving it.

It’s a dog’s natural instincts that compel them to bury. Their instincts tell them to keep their things protected and in a safe place. Dogs used to bury items as a form of survival. They would roam in packs and hunt for their food. As you can imagine, there were times food was scarce,

so dogs knew to protect what they had. They basically created a refrigerator for their food. The food was kept fresher longer, other creatures couldn't find it, and it was "marinated" with a delightful, earthy flavor! (<https://www.caninejournal.com/why-do-dogs-bury-bones/>)

Dogs, and other animals, aren't the only ones that bury things. We do it too, sometimes just for fun.

According to NPR, Forrest Fenn, a millionaire in his 80's, buried a bronze treasure chest, filled with gold and gems somewhere in the Rocky Mountains. He wrote a poem filled with clues about where the treasure is located. One of the stanzas goes like this:

*Begin it where warm waters halt
And take it in the canyon down,
Not far, but too far to walk.
Put in below the home of Brown.*

Many people have tried to find the treasure, some have died in the process, causing Fenn to publish further clues discouraging people from doing dangerous things in the quest. He said, "Please be cautious and don't take risks, the search is supposed to be fun."

Sometimes, we bury things out of fear or for survival, just like our canine friends. Before refrigeration, human beings sometimes buried perishable food to keep it safe to eat. And we've all heard stories of people who have buried money for one reason or another; that eccentric uncle who doesn't trust banks, the rich man who doesn't want anyone to know he's rich. In 2015, \$600,000 was discovered buried in a backyard in California. It was the money previously stolen from an armored car robbery.

Even in the first century when Jesus, and then Matthew, told today's parable, burying money to keep it safe was not unusual and certainly not frowned on. At first glance, though, it seems like the story was told

to teach Jesus followers that burying money was not a good thing. No, money should not be buried, but used to make even more money!

*Now, you have to admit, reading the parable like that doesn't sound very "Jesus-y." Jesus was not a capitalist. So, if the story isn't about bolstering our retirement nest egg, what then, is it about? Let's get there by setting the story in its proper context.

Throughout Lent, we've been looking at some parables that the author of Matthew attributed to Jesus. This parable is one of three used to talk about the theological construct of the Parousia or Second-Coming. These three parables are clustered together in the gospel, right before the stories of Jesus' last week (the Last supper, Jesus' arrest and crucifixion). A version of this parable also appears in the Gospel of Luke. According to scholars, the one in Matthew is closer to what scholars believe was the original story told by Jesus.

Let's look first at how Matthew used the parable. Matthew's original audience was a community of people who were waiting. They were waiting for Jesus to come back and make the world right. Leading people who are waiting is not much fun. Think for a minute about what happens to groups of people who are waiting. Think about the last time you waited for a flight that was late or even for a pizza when you hadn't eaten all day. My experience with people who are waiting has been that three things happen:

People get cranky.

People do (and say) things they shouldn't.

People wander off (like the kid in youth group who is always in the bathroom every time the group is ready to move).

*Matthew used this story to remind his community, who were maybe making him feel like he was herding cats, what living as followers of Jesus, in that time of waiting, required of them.

The “departing and returning master” story theme was pretty common in the stories and writings of early Christian communities. These communities had experienced Jesus’ death, “going away” and were anticipating his return, soon. It was a story structure that was comfortable and that spoke into their lived experiences.

In the parable, a rich man (in Matthew’s version of the story the rich man is meant to symbolize Jesus)...the rich man gave his slaves an enormous amount of money. The first slave was given a lifetime of wages. Even the third slave, given the least, received 15 years’ wages. The Greek word used for possessions in the story alludes to more than just a person’s stuff, but a person’s entire substance or life. The man’s actions are best understood in terms of having made a sacrificial gift to his slaves. Having given the gifts, the man left. The first two slaves invested their gifts and doubled them, and the third hid his gift under the metaphorical bushel. You know, “This little light of mine...hide it under a bushel...NO!...I’m going to let it shine.”

When the man first returned, he congratulated the first two slaves who put the money to work, earning more money. Second, in what would have been quite a surprise to Matthew’s audience, the slave who did the safe thing, hiding the money (which, remember, was an accepted norm in that time and place) was rebuked, his money was given to the first slave who already had the most money, and he was tossed into the darkness where there was...? That’s right...weeping and gnashing of teeth. The end of the story would have left Matthew’s audience absolutely dumbfounded. The third guy, who I am sure the audience would have identified as the obedient, faithful slave, looking out for his master’s interests, was the one who ended up with nothing, cast into the darkness. How can that be?

According to Disciples of Christ minister and scholar, Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, “Matthew uses this story to fill in the content of the nature of the Christian life waiting for the Parousia. The meaning of being “good and faithful” [with reference to the slaves] is not mere theological correctness, passive waiting, or strict obedience to clear instructions, but **active responsibility that takes initiative and risk**. In the story, the master had given no instructions as to what was to be done with the money, so faithfulness was not merely obedience to directions. Each servant had to decide how to use the time during the master’s absence.”

At this point in our study of these parables, you can probably guess which parts of this parable are original to Matthew and not likely part of Jesus’ original parable. The bulk of what is original to Matthew is at the end of the parable, verses 29 and 30, “For to 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.” But, remarkably, the rest of the parable, including the part where the master takes the one talent away from the third slave and gives it to the first slave who already has a lot, is pretty close to an original Jesus parable.

All of this to say, Matthew’s message, while in a different context than Jesus’ message and certainly in a different context than 21st century Bartlesville, Oklahoma, still ought to speak boldly to us today. This parable calls us out of our comfort zones, out of complacency, out of what is safe and away from “this is how we have always done it” and into creative activity that may or may not turn out like we hope or plan. We don’t know. It’s risky. I’ve been wondering this week if the first two slaves had taken their large amounts of money, risked it all and lost it all, would the master have still been ticked off at the third slave? Based on my study, I have to say yes. Burying or hoarding what we have

because we are afraid of losing it or of sharing it is not okay, under any circumstances, according to the story.

Ironically, the church seems to be a place where clinging to what is safe and easy is sometimes the norm. I've been witness to decisions made because they are "the right thing to do," but are really being about continuing to do what feels comfortable. After all, church is the place we come to be comforted, right? Yes...and no. Yes, in that this is the place to come with our questions and our doubt, our grief and our loneliness, because this place is filled with people who care, people who are willing to wrestle with hard things. But, comforting ourselves is not why the church exists. The church exists for the people who are not here today, for the larger community, and for the world. If we bury what we have (our skills, our intelligence, our creativity, our energy, and yes, our money) within these walls, refusing to use them for the common good, we, as Jesus followers, are no better than the third slave or the eccentric uncle who uses the Bank of the Backyard.

*In his remarks on this parable in his book, *Hear Then the Parable: A Commentary on the Parables of Jesus*, New Testament scholar, Dr. Bernard Brandon Scott, wrote, "The parable as a window into the kingdom demands that the servant act neither as preserver nor as one afraid; but act as boldly as he must." The parable is not about amassing wealth, it is about risking everything for the sake of the world. It is about having the courage to follow Jesus' ways, even when we don't know for sure what the outcome will be. As Craddock said, it's about "initiative and risk."

I've been thinking about how this parable might apply to us. Here's my very simplistic assessment. Every year when we create our ministry plan for the next year, we talk about dreaming big, planning for the ministry we believe this community needs, the ministry God is calling us to. I love the conversations we have around that, the ideas, the

excitement, the vision for how Bartlesville could be different, how we could grow and change. It is clear to me that we want to be like the first two slaves in the story. We want to take what we have been given and do big things. We do. But the truth is, “A dream is only a dream until you decide to make it real” (Harry Styles).

Please don't misunderstand me. Together, we do some really wonderful things. We are one of only 10 churches (out of more than 100 in Bartlesville) that hosts families experiencing homelessness as part of Family Promise. Organizations like CONCERN, Martha's Task, and Agapé receive funding, volunteers, and leadership from this church. This church welcomes all people fully into the life of the church and has made special efforts to welcome members of the LGBTQ+ community. We believe we are called to welcome immigrants and refugees and continue to learn more about how we can do that. All of these things should be celebrated.

But I have heard you dream of other things. For example, I've heard some of you dream of starting a Sunday meal program for people who are food insecure. We've learned that other food-related ministries do not serve on Sundays in Bartlesville. We've had more meetings about it than I can count. We've talked about buying a food truck, gleaning food from other organizations, using the church van as a food truck, grilling hot dogs, making soup, peanut allergies...There comes a point when all the meetings and planning have got to give way to action. In my grandpa's words, “We have to do something, even if it isn't right.” Wasn't it Walt Disney who said, “If you can dream it, you can do it?”

*In two weeks, on April 14th, after worship, our youth and the Outreach commission will be making sack lunches to deliver to our neighbors who are hungry. And we don't know what's next, but we know, for that afternoon, some people who would have been hungry, won't be. If this is a dream you can get behind, your help is needed. Please consider

donating bread, Ziploc sandwich bags, potato chips, or cookies. Or you might arrange to stay after church and help make lunches that day. This is where we teach our children what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This is just one of the dreams we have dreamed.

When I was expressing my frustration about our inaction around this dream of providing a Sunday meal, a member said to me, “It’s like we are afraid we won’t do it perfectly. We are afraid to fail, so we do nothing.” Her observation hit me right in the gut. Because researchers say that organizations take on the anxiety of their leaders. The thing I know about myself is that I want to get it right. And sometimes my desire to be perfect gets in the way. It’s fear, fear like the third slave expressed, fear of failure. “What if I lose all the money?” Today’s parable reminds us that the failure isn’t in the doing it wrong, it’s in doing nothing. We are going to do the wrong thing sometimes. This parable encourages us to try anyway. This broken world doesn’t need us to be perfect, it just needs us to show up, with our dreams of what the kin-dom of God is like, and take a risk, by doing something or loving someone. Amen.