

**“Faith, not Fear; Trust, not Talent”**

November 19, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Thirty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Texts: *“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.”* (Matthew 25:14-19, NRSV)

*“So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.  
Turn, O Lord! How long? Have compassion on your servants!  
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,  
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.”* (Psalm 90:12-14, NRSV)

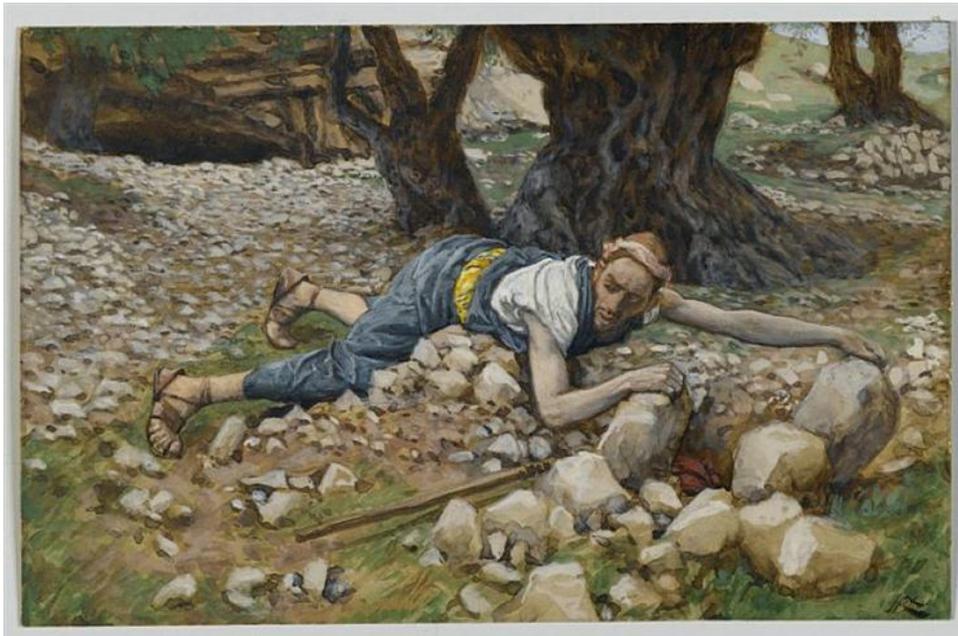


Image Credit: James Tissot (1836-1902), "The Hidden Treasure"; the Brooklyn Museum, NY, NY.

Our Scriptures this morning ask us to consider how we live our lives in consideration of the gift of grace God has given us. The English mystic, Juliana of Norwich, some 700 years ago once said, *"The greatest honor we can give Almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love."*

In light of this truth -- of God's love for us – we are able to lead a life of faith, not fear; of trust, not talent.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

The picture I chose this Sunday to illustrate the parable of Matthew 25:14-30, is a late 19<sup>th</sup> CY watercolor painting by the French artist, J. James Tissot (1836-1902), from a series of illustrations for a book he composed on the life of Jesus Christ over a hundred years ago. The title of the watercolor is "*The Hidden Treasure*". It is in reference to a parable Jesus told about a man who found a treasure of great value buried in a field. This treasure was of such great worth that he sold everything he had to buy that field<sup>ii</sup>. You see him there sprawled on hands and knees pulling the rocks back into place having found it. His nervous eyes dart looking one way, then another . . .

The painting could just as easily be a stand-in illustration for the third servant of Jesus' parable, here, in Matthew 25, as he buries his master's talent in the ground.

Let me say from the outset that the Parable of the talents is not about money, though we need to understand how money figures into the story being told.

A "talent" is from a Greek word that is an expression of weight; in the case of the master of the parable, units of wealth that were immense sums of monies. The word in Greek was "talanton" and this came into our language directly as the word "talent". But our word "talent" is linked to particular abilities a person has to express. The word in Greek is an expression of wages earned. One talent was equal to some 15-20 years of wages; an enormous sum! It was a huge asset to be handed over. Each of the master's servants received enormous amounts of money; a hefty "weight" to be sure!

One of the servants received five talents, another two, and the other, one -- do the math . . .  
5x15 or 20 (=75-100); 2x15-20 (=30-40); 1x15-20 . . . Often in Jesus parables, our Lord used impossible

sums to underscore the true depth or value of the thing being given as a gift; or, in the case of a servant in another story, of the debt being forgiven.<sup>iii</sup> The amount was not the important thing, but the immeasurable wonder of what was being done! Such is the wonder of grace meted out by a loving God.

Remember: this parable is not about money or one's ability to make more (or less) of it. It is about what each one of the servants thought about their master and how they acted based on their perceptions. The first two servants took the assets given and immediately began to trade with them, making even more! The third one, as our picture suggests, buried his in the ground.

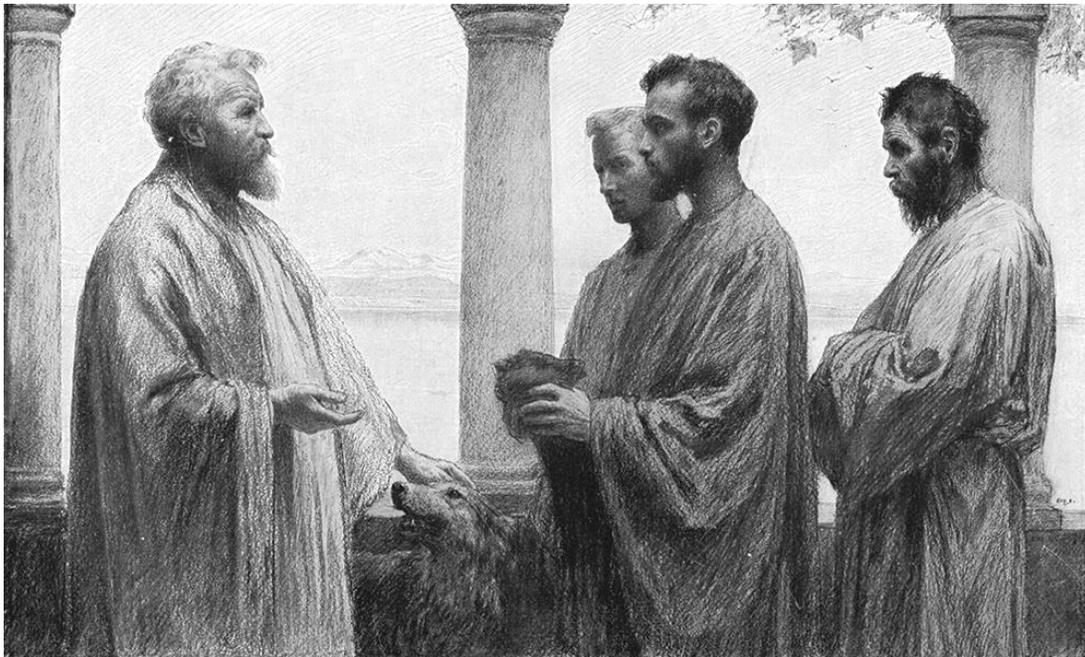
These servants had different ideas of the master who had entrusted them with his largesse. We get a hint of the difference among them in the third man's excuse for his behavior with his Master's money. *"Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."* (Matthew 25:14-15). . . For him, the master, was to be feared! The prudent thing in such a belief was to bury the money in the ground rather than risk its growth or loss in trading it. The first two servants thought differently! There was something in the master that encouraged them to move out into the world to make trades, to spread the wealth around, making more wealth in the process!

This parable is not about money! . . . This is a parable about having faith to reach out, rather than be fearful not to try; about trusting in relationships regardless of the talent(s) in one's possession.

In most of the parables Jesus tells, the king or the master in his stories are types of his heavenly Father, but here, in Matthew 25, the master is really Jesus himself. This parable is part of a series of parables he tells in this part of Matthew that concern his leaving in order to bring the coming of the kingdom and of his eventual return to settle all accounts in righteousness and joyful living. Last week we spoke of the need to prepare and be alert for his return in the parable of the ten maidens<sup>iv</sup>; next

week this group of stories is about the dividing of the servants into sheep and goats by how they have behaved toward others; in how they have served others as if it was unto Jesus.<sup>v</sup>

As I was preparing for this sermon I came across a different picture of this parable of the talents, a pen and ink drawing, by the artist, Eugene Burnand (1850-1921), of Swiss heritage, who lived in the same time period as Tissot. The drawing is entitled, "The Talents". I share it here:



Notice the details of the scene: the master is depicted at the moment of the accounting with the three servants. His right hand is open and extended -- perhaps about to receive a portion of the talents that have been increased. The five talent servant and the two talent servant stand shoulder to shoulder and look directly into the eyes of the master. The third servant stands behind, shoulders slouched, face drawn down and inward; he looks for all the world like he is on trial. Do you notice any other detail in the scene? Do you notice the dog? He is slightly ahead of the master, but turned back to him and smiling as a happy collie would. The master has his left hand on the dog's head, stroking it.

What a curious detail! Could it be that the dog is a metaphor of the faithful servant as all dogs are in sight of their masters? *"Well done, good and faithful servant . . ."* The common dog name of

"Fido" has its roots in faithfulness -- "bono *fides*" -- "good *faith*". The artist-theologian, Lynn Miller offers that maybe the dog is there as a character reference for the master . . . *"The dog is looking up at the master with an expression that seems to be one of calmness and trust rather than cowering and fear. Remember the advice to never trust a person who doesn't love dogs, but always trust a dog when they don't like a person. Is this dog there to say that this master -- for all his demands for profit and casting out into places here teeth are gnashed -- can be trusted?"<sup>vi</sup>*

The story here is a parable of what we believe about God and are willing to do with the gift of grace he gives us . . . Are we alive in that gift to share it with others, to pass it around, stirring into flame that gift in others -- do we have faith in him, or do we fear him? Do we place our trust in him or worry about the talent that lies there in the ground doing nothing?

Steve Goodier relates a story that is pertinent for us here:

*Erma Bombeck was known for her humorous journalism. But she frequently seasoned her writing with pinches of wisdom. At the end of a newspaper column on March 10, 1987, Bombeck wrote these words:*

*I always had a dream that when I am asked to give an accounting of my life to a higher court, it will go like this: "So, empty your pockets. What have you got left of your life? Any dreams that were unfulfilled? Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven't spread around? "*

*And I will answer, "I've nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I'm as naked as the day I was born." . . .<sup>vii</sup>*

Steve concludes this illustration with these words: *"I can hardly think of a more worthwhile and joyous way to live."* And thus we come full circle back to where we started with Dame Juliana's words *"to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love."*

Imagine a life lived with such glad and joyous completeness!

In Psalm 90, read as part of our Scriptures today, we are encouraged to *"number our days so that we may get a heart of wisdom."* It is not a call to check off the calendar each passing day in anxiety

and worrisome toil – not at all! But in realizing how brief our time on earth is in the span of things, to instead, grab hold of life with a gusto and make every day count -- for God's sake<sup>viii</sup> . . .

Grab hold of the immeasurable treasure of God's grace given to you and share it in faith, not fear; give it away in acts of love that is a demonstration of your trust in God, and not, sadly, a talent buried in the ground.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> From a 2014 blog entry on this text by Dan Clendenin at <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20141020JJ.shtml>

<sup>ii</sup> See Matthew 13:44-46.

<sup>iii</sup> See Matthew 18:21-35.

<sup>iv</sup> See Matthew 25:1-13.

<sup>v</sup> See Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>vi</sup> Lynn Miller in a blog posting at <http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2017/11/art-lectionary-dog-talent.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Steve Goodier in a blog post from 2013 at <http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/2013/11/all-used-up.html>

<sup>viii</sup> J. Clinton McCann in an exegetical thought on Psalm 90, at [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).