

“Discipline”  
*Faithful Stewards of God’s Infinite Grace (1 Peter 4:10)*  
Matthew 25: 14-30  
November 15, 2015  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

The story is told that:

“It had been a hard winter in the Appalachian area. The snow had piled up deeper and deeper, the mercury dropped, rivers froze, people suffered. The Red Cross used helicopters to fly in supplies. One crew had been working day after day long hours. They were on their way home late in the afternoon when they saw a little cabin submerged in the snow. There was a thin whisper of smoke coming from the chimney. The rescue team figured they were probably about out of food, fuel, perhaps medicine. Because of the trees they had to put the helicopter down a mile away. They put on heavy packs with emergency supplies, trudged through heavy snow, waist deep, reached the cabin exhausted, panting, perspiring. They pounded on the door. A thin, gaunt mountain woman opened the door and the lead man gasped, ‘We’re from the Red Cross.’ She was silent for a moment and then she said, ‘It’s been a hard winter, Sonny. I just don’t think we can give anything this year.’” (David Beckett)

This sermon is not about investing in Wal-Mart or Facebook or Coca-Cola – or even the Red Cross. It’s about investing in God and what God wants to do in the world.

**I. Faithful.**

God is faithful, and expects his people to be faithful in return. Jesus uses the parable of the talents to teach this truth. God is like the man in the story, who entrusts his property to his servants. Faithful servants understand that the property belongs to the Master and not to them.

A faithful Master trusts his servants and gives them greater responsibility once they have proven themselves.

There is a relationship of mutual trust between God and his people. We are faithful to God because God has been so faithful to us.

The story is told of a faithful Christian who was asked, “Are you looking forward to your eternal rest in heaven?”

“Who said anything about rest?” he responded. “When I get on the other side, the first question I ask will be: ‘Master, what's my next task?’”

The faithful servants in Jesus’ parable are ready to work for their Master, doing whatever tasks they are called to do.

Sometimes we are called to great deeds that are noticed by others. Sometimes we are called to quiet acts of kindness that go largely unnoticed.

An anonymous writer shares this story:

“My small son and I were taking a walk. In the far corner of the field we found a small patch of beautiful and fragrant flowers. They were in the middle of weeds, almost completely hidden and unnoticed, yet these flowers were blooming in full beauty and we sensed their fresh fragrance. All of us have met persons unnoticed by many, but who in the middle of struggle and unlikely surroundings far from the center of attention lives lives of beauty and fragrance. And living lives which seemed obscure they faithfully fulfilled God's calling for them. God's question on the last day will not be, ‘How much were you noticed?’ or even ‘How much did you do?’ Rather, his question will be, ‘Were you faithful in fulfilling your calling where I placed you?’”

Faithfulness has to do with staying true to God’s leading in our lives, even in the face of

others' demands that we follow their leading instead. We are called to remain true to God.

## **II. Fruitful.**

God is fruitful. The works of his hands multiply abundantly. Seeds grow into wheat and flowers and fruit-bearing trees. Eggs become chickens become more eggs. Busy bees turn pollen into honey. God's handiwork is all about fruitfulness.

Likewise, God expects his people to be fruitful. He expects us to be diligent in our work for his kingdom, and to be able to show the fruits of our labors for him.

Two of the servants in Jesus' parable – the 5-talent servant and the 2-talent servant – are fruitful in their work for the Master. They invest in his future; they pursue his purposes; they work for the benefit of his household.

In the first century a "talent" was a measure of weight for gold, silver and copper. We don't know exactly how much a talent was worth, but we do know that it was the largest weight in normal everyday use. One "talent" was a huge amount, especially when it expressed the weight of gold, silver and copper – extremely precious commodities. (Leonard Sweet).

"Talent" came to be used as a word to describe our unique gifts. Some folks have five talents – we know these multi-talented folks. Some churches have five talents – we know these mega-gifted institutions, with multiple staff and adequate funding.

I suspect that most of us are one- or two-talent people. I suspect most churches are one- or two-talent churches.

Whatever our talent level, God has given each of us at least one talent. He intends that we use that one talent for the good of his kingdom. And if we are blessed enough to have two or even five talents, we are to use all of them to further God's good purposes, as in this story about:

“A lady by the name of Ruth Colvin, [who] was shocked at her hometown's illiteracy rate. So she decided that God would have her do something about it. ‘I felt strongly motivated by the Parable of the Talents,’ she says. ‘We're responsible for making good use of the knowledge we're given.’

“So Ruth, a teacher, set up a makeshift office in her suburban basement, filing important matters in an old refrigerator, and launched Literacy Volunteers of America in 1962. Today, LVA has helped 90,000 people learn to read thanks to a grandmotherly woman who saw a need and put her talents to work meeting it.” (King Duncan).

Whether we are talking about our money or our gifts and abilities, God expects us to invest what we have in the work of his kingdom.

### **III. Fearless.**

One servant in Jesus' story does not invest in the Master's work. Out of fear, he hoards the one talent he has been given. There's a poem, by an anonymous author, that describes well the strategy for life employed by the one talent servant:

There was a very cautious man  
who never laughed or played.  
He never risked, he never tried.  
He never sang or prayed.  
And when he passed away,  
his insurance was denied.  
For since he never really lived,  
they claim he never died. (anonymous; shared by Eric S. Ritz)

Even one talent is a hugely extravagant amount of money in Jesus' day. In order to be faithful, we need to have respect for the Master. We need to love and honor him, with a deep desire to serve his purpose in the world.

The one-talent servant does not respect or love or honor the Master. The one-talent man describes his master as "a harsh man, reaping where [he] did not sow, and gathering where [he] did not scatter seed" (v. 24). And so, says the man, "I was afraid."

The 5-talent and 2-talent servants are not afraid. They are fearless. They invest the talents the Master has entrusted to them. This is risky. Investments can go sour; business deals can go awry; endeavors on behalf of the kingdom can fail.

The Master rewards the servants who take risks in order to pursue the Master's purposes. The Master punishes the fearful servant who digs a hole and hides the Master's riches in it.

We might pause to wonder: Why does the fearful servant do this?

The story does not tell us. We can make some guesses. Maybe he fears that someone will steal the Master's gold. Certainly a harsh Master – which this servant believes his Master to be -- would punish the one who allowed even one piece of his gold and silver to be stolen.

Maybe the servant, like many of us, feels that his one talent is not enough to make a difference in the world. If he compares his one talent with the two and the five of the other servants, he gets a confirmation of his fears. Surely the Master, being a harsh and selfish man, will punish the one-talent servant regardless of what he does. He can never hope to compete; if he puts his one talent alongside his two- and five- talent co-workers, he is sure to lose that contest.

Ultimately, the one-talent man does not trust the Master. He does not believe the Master will treat him well.

Maybe we are secretly like this one-talent man. Maybe we do not trust that God has good things in store for us. Maybe we do not believe that God is truly on our side. We may say that we trust in the Lord, but we secretly live our lives in fear. Like the servant who buries his one talent in a safe hole in the ground, we bury our lives in small, safe, secure little worlds of our own making. We never risk anything for God.

God rewards the fearless. God rewards the risk-takers. God rewards the bold.

Or at least, says Jesus, this is the way things work in the kingdom of heaven.

After all, God is fearless, according to Jesus' story. God entrusts all of his property, all of his kingdom, all of creation, to us! -- his flawed, confused, fearful people. In the telling of this story of the talents, Jesus challenges us to put aside our fears, to be like the faithful servants who risk everything for the Master. Their reward? Double what the Master first gives to them.

There have been a number of movies and documentaries in recent years about Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple computer company. Jobs, who died in 2011, is known and beloved by millions, maybe even billions of folks who worship their iPhones and other Apple products. The story is told, that:

“Jobs decided Mr. John Sculley was the man needed to help him fulfill his dream of building a completely different kind of computer company, one which would make computers available to every person in the world. However, Mr. Sculley was comfortably and safely entrenched as president of the Pepsico Corporation, the makers of the soft drink Pepsi. In this position, John Sculley had achieved everything that a man could want: power, prestige, public recognition, an enormous salary and a secure future. The thought of a career change requiring a move to the West Coast frightened him. He was concerned about losing pensions and deferred compensation and the adjustment to living in California, in other words, ‘the pragmatic stuff that

preoccupies the middle-aged.’ He says that, ‘I was overly concerned with what would happen next week and the week after next.’

“John Sculley knew that he was safe and happy at Pepsico. But he also knew that he had grown to dislike the competitive nature of the business. He also knew how bored he was. Steven Jobs at Apple Computer sensed this. And so he finally confronted his new friend with this pointed question. He said to John, ‘Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?’ That question penetrated deep into the heart and mind of John Sculley. It changed the course of his life.

“He therefore went to Apple Computer and helped it to grow into one of the most successful corporations in the world. Mr. Sculley's life was changed because he took the risk and decided to invest. Was it a risk? Yes. But without it, there would be no reward.” (Donald William Dotterer).

### **Closing.**

Jesus is talking about money in this parable. He is also talking about the kingdom of heaven and what that kingdom is like.

Psalms 19 says that God’s law is “more to be desired...than gold, even much fine gold” (Ps. 19:10). Jesus says, in Matthew 28, “Go therefore and make disciples...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:19-20).

The greatest treasure we have is the Bible, God’s Word, the good news of relationship with God in Christ Jesus. It has been said that “Knowing this [good] news and failing to share it with others is like knowing of a treasure hidden deep in the earth, but through indifference or inactivity leaving that treasure buried, rather than taking the trouble to dig it up and enjoy its abundance with everyone” (Lindsay P. Armstrong, a pastor at First Presbyterian Church in

Atlanta, Georgia).

Jesus says, “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” (v. 29).

In the economy of God’s kingdom, spiritual riches are multiplied. The one who has is given more; the one who has nothing loses even the little they have. Jesus urges us to nurture and care for the spiritual treasures of God, otherwise we could lose them.

What is Jesus saying to us in the parable of the talents? What are we to do with the wealth God has entrusted to us? What are we to do with the abundance of riches God has bestowed on us?

Be faithful. Be fruitful. Be fearless.

Be ready to risk everything. Be ready to change the world.

Amen.