



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
19 November 2017
Sermon: "Toil and Trouble"
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Psalm 90:1-12
Matthew 25:14-30

It's almost here! That sacred evening where people of all stripes gather together
around turkeys and pies,
sweet potatoes and stuffing,
around a table built on stories and memories and hard work,
where we sit beside sisters and brothers,
families given and families chosen,
where tables are pushed together,
where there are empty chairs for those now gone
and high chairs for first timers.

It's traditionally an evening of reuniting, reconnecting,
It is also a time where unresolved disputes might still linger,
where there may be things left unspoken or things too carelessly said.

And still we gather (year after year) at table,
because we want to or because we promised we would,
and side by side, we share gratitudes aloud,
catch up on lost time, fill our bellies, perhaps recharge our spirits.

The early Christian communities also gathered around table.
There were no sanctuaries with pews and organs,
no Sunday school hour or courtyard fellowship.
There were no Christian holidays or liturgical colors.
Church was simply "a supper club."

The folks invited were fugitives and rebels (living out their faith despite the threat of Rome). They gathered in secret in peoples' homes, around food and wine, sitting on cushions and stools.

And everyone who Jesus's life had touched or inspired had a sacred place at the table. I mean, everyone: fishermen, nomads, tax collectors, slaves, prostitutes, beggars and more. It was here around breads and spices that they shared stories about Jesus the Christ. They never lacked for conversation:
"Remember the look on everyone's faces that time when he flipped the table in the temple?"
"Did you know that he told my cousins to literally drop everything and follow him?"

But I bet more than anything, they spent hours retelling his parables: some stories perplexing, some hilarious, some truly enlightening. They probably got into deep discussions, even heated debates, unpacking these complex tales, discerning what Jesus' life must have meant for theirs, wondering if and when their rabbi, their Messiah would return to them again – just as he had promised.

“The Parable of the Talents” is the ultimate discussion starter. Just like back then at table, this parable has bewildered and inspired theologians and believers throughout the centuries (*and if you are looking for something to discuss at your tables this Thursday, I highly recommend it*).

The parable takes us into a time of masters and slaves. A wealthy boss is setting out on a journey, but before he leaves, he first gathers together his three servants and entrusts everything he has to them.

In Luke's version of the story, the same amount of talents is given to each slave, but in Matthew's account – which we read today – each person receives a different sum according to his or her ability. To the first, he gives five talents, to the next, two, and to last just one.

So, the first discussion question is: What is a talent?

Now before we start shouting out things that we “excel at,” it's important to note that it wasn't until the Middle Ages that this term “talent” got introduced to the English language as an expression for one's “physical or spiritual gifts.” In fact, some scholars say, that it was this very parable that sparked the new meaning for the word “talent.”

Back in Jesus's time, talents were strictly financial. They were units of weight for gold, copper or silver. One talent was worth the amount a day laborer could expect to make in twenty years. Imagine today an annual salary of \$30,000 times twenty – that's \$600,000 for just a single talent.

For the people enslaved in this story, they were sold or born into a life where they would never expect to see or hold any sum of money - let alone such an exorbitant amount. How fascinating that they were now entrusted with so much, and even more unusual, that they weren't given any instruction about what they should do with the money.

Truth be told, we know we still live in a world of masters and slaves: where there are winners and losers, rulemakers and followers; where some have more than enough and some hardly any at all; where the home you are born into, the color of our skin, your gender or sexual identity still sharply impact your ability to climb the ladder, be accepted, live in peace.

We certainly hold varying amounts of talents in our hands, and we are left to determine what to do with them in our lifetime, what we will do with the sum we have each been given. Like this story, these talents might be financial, or as this story has taken shape throughout the years, these talents might be our various “spiritual or physical gifts” that God calls us to hold and to use.

Ignatius of Loyola writes that when we discern how to use the talents we’ve been given, we should aim for them to enhance our participation in the work of God; our gifts should be for the glory of our holy master and for the healing of the world around us.ⁱ

So, the second discussion question is: Why do we hide our talents?

Scripture tells us that when the master goes away, leaving no instruction, two of the slaves immediately get to work. We don’t know exactly what they do, but we can imagine that they somehow use their personal talents to double their financial ones. The third slave however, digs a hole and hides his one talent deep in the ground.

It’s understandable: the ground is safe.

With rampant crime and corrupt bankers everywhere, this slave knows that the ground is the most secure place. I mean, imagine a slave holding onto something so valuable. Citizens might get suspicious: “maybe he stole the talent”, “maybe he’s not to be trusted.”

To put it in the ground is to no longer have the responsibility of carrying it, investing in it, sharing it, growing it. Surely, he thinks it is in the masters’ and his own best interest to keep this precious gift tucked away. And so, he digs. He digs because he is afraid.

We know this crippling feeling all too well – fear: that which grabs hold of our talents and prevents us from moving our faith forward. Because of fear, we too often hide our God-given gifts. We keep them safe and out of sight.

Maybe it’s the fear of singing because you think your voice is not polished enough, or the fear of marching because someone you know might see you, or the fear of speaking up because you know you can’t take the words back, or the fear of reaching out because it will mean the beginning of something new. To live with fear is to dig a hole and to hide what is most precious and most needed – from God, one another, and the world.

In the popular musical, *Hamilton*, which creatively tells the story of our American forefathers and foremothers through hip hop, a young Aaron Burr struggles to unleash his own talents. In his monologue song, he reveals why:

*“My grandfather was a fire and brimstone preacher,
but there are things that the homilies and hymns won’t teach ya.
My mother was a genius, my father commanded respect*

They left no instruction – just a legacy to protect.”

He goes on....

“If there’s a reason I’m still alive

when everyone who loves me has died,

I’m willing to wait for it. I’m willing to wait for it.”ⁱⁱ

For Aaron Burr, living in the midst of a country at war and on the brink of colossal change, he is afraid that any misstep could cost him his family’s reputation, his honor, all that he has built. He might fall, he might die, he might disappoint, he might lose.

And so, unlike his competitor, Alexander Hamilton who is quick to express how he feels about *everything*, Aaron Burr stays silent and safe, he doesn’t stand on the front line, or speak from the heart, or risk it all – he hides his talent deep in the ground and he waits.

But in this parable, God does not call us to wait.

God does not call us to harbor our gifts.

God does not call us to play it safe.

God calls us to live with *fearless faith*:

to open our hands and courageously show the talents we’ve been given.

So, our third discussion question is: How should we use our talents?

In our text, we learn that when the master returns and finds out that one of his slaves has buried his talent, he becomes furious. In this dramatic scene, Matthew reminds us that one day Jesus will return and we must not wait to act, but instead get to work now on building the kingdom of God.

The recent film “Victoria and Abdul,” retells the true story of the unexpected friendship between the queen of England and an unschooled prison worker from India. When Abdul meets Victoria, she is in her eighties, her health is failing, she is widowed, lonely and tired.

She confides in her new friend, “It’s an impossible position being queen. I am hated by millions of people all over the world, I have nine children, all disappointments, and look at me: I am a fat, lame, impotent, silly, old woman. What’s the point Abdul? What’s the point?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Abdul gets down on his knees and leans forward, “Service” he says. “I think we are not here to worry for ourselves – we are here for a greater purpose: service.”

And so are we. As people of faith, we must remember that no matter how great or small our talents, we are each called to use them for a greater collective purpose: to serve the Lord.

To serve the Lord is to be bold and courageous.

To serve the Lord is to say “yes” and joyfully offer what we have been given.

To serve the Lord is to be God’s hands feeding, comforting and healing this broken world.

...Service looks like Katie, a self-made minister from Room in the Inn who spends her days caring for her fellow sisters and brothers on the streets of Asheville.

...Service looks like Jose, the chef who has helped to bring over 2 million meals to Puerto Rico, as many still remain without power and running water.

...Service looks like Divya, the single mom who gets her kids on the bus each morning and then heads out to work two straight shifts at the 7-11.

...Service looks like Jesse, the brave man who called out to the crazed shooter last week to aim his weapon at him instead of at the Elementary school.

...Service looks like the thirty-five GCPC youth and adults, who met on Friday to discuss cyber bullying, sexual assault and how to build healthy relationships.

...Service looks like our Communion team, who cut up bread and pour grape juice to be shared monthly at this very table.

...Service looks like Amy, the big sister who is teaching her younger brother multiplication.

...Service looks like worship – a time where we come together to give thanks to God, and to multiply our gifts in community.

Now what?

Siblings in Christ, this table is the heartbeat of church.

This is where it all began.

Every month, we eat our fill here.

And every moment we are welcomed to gather around it.

For here we meet our host, our master, our Lord – the One who calls us out of our comfort zones and towards what is hard and most important.

Here we gather side by side, as many before us did,
to laugh together, cry together, share together, to be awakened and to be transformed.

We come to discuss parables that boggle our minds,
to challenge each other to roll up our sleeves,
to celebrate the various gifts we've each been given,
and to discern how God is calling us to use them to build up the holy kingdom.

Friends, to give thanks to God is to live in service to God.

It means leaving our fears behind.

It means filling our bellies with faith.

It means holding our talents out before us,
with palms open, for all the world to see.

ⁱ Dorothy Bass. *Practicing Our Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010. p.105

ⁱⁱ Leslie Odom Jr. "Wait for It." *Hamilton*. Lin Manuel Miranda. Atlantic Records 2015

ⁱⁱⁱ *Victoria and Abdul*. Stephen Frears. Focus Features/Universal Pictures. 2017