

Before we can really dig into this parable, we need to clear up what the word "talent" means here. It is Greek and was a unit of measurement in many middle eastern cultures. One talent was not just one coin. A Talent was what a laborer would earn in 16.5 years. So in ancient terms or in today's terms, we're talking about a lot of money. It might have been more helpful had the translators said, "A man, before going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave two and a half million dollars. To another, he gave one million dollars. And to a third he gave five hundred thousand dollars."

Does that change the story for you at all?

It sure changes it for me.

To start with, it gives me a different appreciation of the Master. Anyone can leave people with \$10 or \$20 to invest. And while it would be nice to get it back, if you lose \$10, you still might have some other options. But this master didn't hand out \$1, 5, and 10. He gave out, conservatively, \$4 million.

That's quite a gift. Staggering, really. It is quite a responsibility. If the investments don't work out, the master is the one who has lost. His relationship with these servants must be unique. You wouldn't just hand \$4 million dollars over to servants if you didn't know them well enough to know if they were going to leave town with your money. He clearly trusted these servants with something of great value.

Putting this parable in modern economic terms also gives me a different appreciation of the servants who receive the gifts. If I were entrusted with \$1 million to invest, I'd be humbled by the trust that had been placed in me. It would probably make me reconsider my relationship to the master and my appraisal of my own abilities—"I didn't know he thought I was capable of this. Wow. I wonder what else I might be capable of?"

What could you do if someone placed that kind of trust in you? Could you live into bigger dreams for yourself?

Two of the servants seemed to. They took the talents they'd been given and they immediately went out and invested them. When he returned, they had doubled his money.

I confess that it has been hard for me to read this text while the stock market keeps falling. Because, I've been wondering, how do you DOUBLE an investment without doing something very RISKY? I don't think you can. What did they invest in? The Damascus Stock Exchange? Camel stock futures? Olive oil? Credit Default Swaps? Housing developments on the Dead Sea coast?

Whatever it was, these servants took risks to double their investment.

We have seen these risks playing out rather badly lately. And so when we see the third servant, the one who buried his talent in the ground, we likely have some compassion for him. He may not have taken any risks, but he didn't lose the money. Right?

I think the parable I'd like to see is the one where the man leaves his servants with the money, goes on his trip, and while he's gone, the economy goes down the tube. How would

he have responded to the servants who had gone out there and made those risky investments had the investments not made money? What if they had taken the gifts they'd been given, gone out on a limb to do something new, and then failed?

Perhaps we can see the answer in the parable we already have. Did you notice the response from the third servant when the man came back? "Master, I knew 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."

What?

Who's he talking about? The same "harsh man" who just left him with \$500,000?

The other servants didn't say anything like that. And his responses to the first two servants—"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."—those responses don't seem to support the third servant's claim.

But, for whatever reason, two of the servants seem to have a good relationship with the master, and one of them does not. The first two servants were comfortable enough in their relationship with the master to respond to his gift, to respond to the task he gave them, with confidence. Despite the risks. And, I suspect that had they lost everything when the Jerusalem Stock Market crashed, I think his answer to them might have been the same.

"Well done good and trustworthy slave. Enter into the joy of your master."

Because, of course, this parable isn't about money. It is about these other staggering gifts we've been given. These talents, as it were. Interestingly, because of the usage of this word in this parable, the Greek word *talanta* is carried over almost intact to mean "a natural aptitude or skill".¹ There may be other examples, but this is the only one I know of where the figurative use of a term by Jesus becomes a new word with new meaning. The word *talanta* moves from a staggering amount of money to become a description of the gifts we've been given.

Let's rephrase the parable again, in non-economic terms.

"For it is as if God summoned God's servants and entrusted his belongings to them. To one he gave the gift of hospitality. To another, he gave the gift of evangelism, and to a third, he gave the bread of life and the cup of salvation. The one who received the talent of hospitality went out and invested the gift by being welcoming and providing safe space for those she met along the way. The one who received the gift of evangelism went and invested the gift by sharing the good news of the Gospel and invited many others to join him. The third servant took the gift of bread and wine and buried them in a hole.

When God returned, the first servant shared stories of how she had overcome her fear of being rejected and how, as a result, the gift of hospitality had made a difference in the lives of the people with whom she had shared it. The second servant shared stories of how God's confidence in him had allowed him to overcome his fear of public speaking and how the gift of evangelism had allowed him to share the good news of the gospel with others, that they might also know the love and grace of God. To both of these servants, God said, "well done good and trustworthy servants. Enter into the joy of your master."

¹ Oxford American Dictionary

The third servant came to God and said, "I didn't know you well enough to overcome my fear, so I buried the gifts you'd given me and put them in a hole so nothing would happen to them. They're a little dirty, but here they are."²

"You wicked and lazy slave," God replied, "I'd given you gifts of life to share—what good were they going to do in a hole in the ground? If you weren't going to invest them in other people, you could have at least passed them on to someone who would have.

"For to all those who have, more will be given and they will have an abundance. But from those who have nothing, who have buried their gifts in the ground, even what they have will be taken away."

Friends, the good news is that God has given us all gifts beyond measure. I may not know what your talents are, but I hope you have a sense of them. And I hope you notice the talents in others. Often we don't recognize how our talents can be invested until others suggest things to us. And I pray that you are cultivating and sharing your gifts for the betterment of the Kingdom of God.

Because, for you to not share your talents is the equivalent of burying them in the dirt. And we all have reasons when we dig those holes. We're busy. We're afraid of failure or rejection. We don't think our talents are worth sharing. We think other people are more talented. We don't think it matters—to others or to God.

But this week, I invite you to lay down your shovel. I invite you to consider that your talents do matter—to this community and to God. Where would we be if people hadn't shared their money and talents with this community? We wouldn't have this building, or a choir, or Sunday school teachers, or the flower beds weeded, or bulletins typed, or any of this. Where would our community be without churches and individuals to support the homeless shelters, to provide thanksgiving dinners for children, to send shoeboxes to children around the world so that all children will receive a gift on Christmas, to offer assistance to refugees who are trying to resettle, to provide free medical and dental care to those who can't otherwise afford it? It would be a sad world, indeed. A world full of buried talents.

I'm not, in general, a big fan of "reality" kinds of TV shows. And I don't watch American Idol or America's Got Talent, but after reading this parable, I think it is good that those kind of shows are on the air. Because those shows are FULL of people who want to share their talents. And they share their talents with JOY. And not all of them succeed, because in our world, we like to narrow things down to "winners" and "losers". But I think that if God were the judge of one of those shows, God would be sitting right there next to Simon, Randy, and Paula, and would thank each and every one of those contestants for showing up and for sharing the joy. God would give a thumbs up and a high five to all of them. Because God looks at talents differently than we do. They aren't commodities with a limited supply and demand. They are gifts. Gifts that are only of value when shared with others. And gifts that only expand once they are shared.

We are wrapping up our stewardship campaign this morning. In a little while, we will all walk forward to place our offerings, our pledge cards, and our Time and Talent forms in the baskets. I realize that many of you have already turned in your pledge cards, and I thank you

² Thanks to Anna Carter Florence in Lectionary Homiletics for this insight.

for doing that. But I still invite you to walk forward. Because, really, it is ourselves we are offering to God.

“For to all those who have, more will be given and they will have an abundance.”

May it be so. Amen.