

Talent in Abundance

Matthew 25:14-30

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. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, '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.' And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, '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.' Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, '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.' But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and

give it to the one with the ten talents. 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

[For the second consecutive Sunday, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of contradicting the standard interpretation of one of Matthew’s parables. Last week, I suggested that the parable of the ten virgins – or the ten bridesmaids – was not, as generally rendered, a meditation on the apocalypse but rather a metaphor on life and death. The so-called wise bridesmaids had prepared for the inevitable, yet unknown, day of death by storing up resources through love and companionship, aesthetic appreciation, the laughter of children and, generally, immersion in the community of faith. Those wise women, in the course of lives lived fully, had stored up enough oil to take them through the night, whereas the foolish women had lived and loved sparingly, so that they did not have enough resources to endure the night.]

Today’s parable of the talents is often taken as a brief for capitalism – and perhaps in these times, when we are witnessing a kind of corporate socialism, such a brief is necessary. The apology for capitalism goes something like this: The master congratulates and rewards the servants who invest their resources and double their initial investments. At the same time, the master chastises the servant who, out of fear, buries his money in a hole. When the master comes and demands to see what the servant has done with his stake, the servant digs it up and returns the investment unimproved, whereupon the master explodes with rage. “You wicked and lazy slave!” he shouts. “You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.”

Alternatively, in a somewhat more benign reading, this parable of the talents takes the word *talent* at face value as being, not a denomination of money or currency, but as talent in the sense of ability. The lesson then would be that we should use and develop our God-given abilities to the fullest. Anything less would be ungrateful and irresponsible, thereby earning for the laggard the enmity of the master.

I suppose that there are good reasons to embrace these interpretations, although I confess that I have my doubts that Jesus felt any need to offer a précis of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

I propose instead that we view this parable in the context of abundance rather than privation or judgment. Let's remember that a talent, in first-century Palestine, was as an extraordinary sum. The master, then, was entrusting his wealth to the servants. And he was willing to do so over a long period of time; rather than seek instant gratification or a quick buck, he was willing to walk away and allow the servants, effectively, to enjoy the master's wealth – not fully, perhaps, but at the least vicariously.

And what is it that the master – Christ, in this case – entrusts to his servants? I suppose the televangelists and the prosperity preachers would have us believe that Jesus is doling out huge dollops of affluence to the faithful – sports cars, furs, vacation homes – in hopes, of course, that the faithful will redirect some of those assets to the prosperity preachers themselves. I find no warrant for that in the New Testament.

We could enumerate the various theological virtues associated with the deity: omnipotence, compassion, mercy and the like. But the overriding characteristic attributed to Jesus was love, unconditional love.

And this was the badge of association with the man from Galilee. “A new command I give you,” Jesus told his followers: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”¹

So what the master dispenses out of his storehouse in copious measure is love, love without condition. And, when the recipient responds in kind – by responding in love toward others – that initial investment multiplies. But if the recipient of the gift of love does not reciprocate with a demonstration of love toward others, the initial gift becomes stagnant and yields no return. Elsewhere, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to yeast; it expands to overflowing. And so it is with the exercise and the demonstration of love, which finds its fullest expression in the community of faith.

More than two decades ago, when I learned that a second child was on the way, my excitement and anticipation was tempered by a kind of sadness. In part because of my teaching schedule, I had been able to spend an extraordinary amount of time with my firstborn. I was his primary caregiver, and we spent hours together playing with trains and building Lego cities and exploring the marvels of Manhattan – the Empire State Building, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Staten Island ferry, the Bronx Zoo and that wondrous blue whale suspended from the ceiling at the Museum of Natural History. And I loved him dearly – as of course I still do.

But a part of me actually worried about, and felt sorry for, the child not yet born. I was concerned that there was no way that I could possibly love him as much as I loved Christian.

That’s a foolish concern, as I recognize now. Love has a way of multiplying, not diminishing. The lesson of this parable – and of the New Testament generally – is that love is not finite. It’s not something that you dole out parsimoniously: “I’ll love my husband and my family and leave it at that.”

¹ John 13:34 (NIV).

No. Like yeast, love grows and expands. I love my second son no less than the first. Love does that. When exercised freely and without stinting, it takes us over and multiplies beyond measure.

And it also leaves us vulnerable, for that is the nature of love, especially unconditional love. We open ourselves to hurt and disappointment. The servant who buried his master's talent was not, therefore, acting unreasonably. It's far easier and much safer to slink away and to cower in the corner. That way we don't risk being hurt and disappointed.

But, in so doing, we miss out on the richness of life, the satisfactions of love offered freely and – in most cases – reciprocated. And when true, unconditional love is met with rejection, the response dictated in the Gospels is not a slinking away in despair but a redoubling of love. “For to all those who have,” Jesus says, “more will be given, and they will have an abundance.”

And that, to me, sounds like a good investment.

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Christ Church

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