

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

November 19, 2023 – PENTECOST 25 / PROPER 28 (YR. A)

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Use It or Lose It*”

First Lesson	Zephaniah 1:7,12-18	(A prophecy of the End Times)
The Psalter	Psalms 90:1-8, 12	(The Lord is our refuge; He turns us back to dust)
Second Lesson	1 Thessalonians 5:1-11	(We need not fear the Day of the Lord; we are in Christ)
Gospel	St. Matthew 25:14-30	(Jesus tells the parable of the talents)

No one should *ever* entrust me with money. I’m sure to lose it, forget it was given to me, or put it in the wrong place. My brief career as a bank teller when I was in college lasted approximately three months because I could never balance my cash drawer. And even though I have an IQ of 180 and hold 5 academic degrees, I can’t balance a checking account to save my life. So, I can relate to these guys in today’s Gospel who didn’t handle well what was given to them.

First, a quick word about St. Matthew’s use of the term “talent.” It doesn’t refer to a skill or a special ability, or have anything to do with being able to play the violin or speak Japanese. A talent is a sum of money, a very *large* sum of money—in biblical times, equal to the average worker’s wages for fifteen years. So we’re not talking about pocket change, here.

Still, this is a confusing parable, because it’s a strange way for Jesus to characterize the Kingdom of Heaven. Let’s look at the math (another thing I’m no good at; fortunately, Jesus is): A master divides eight talents among three slaves. One gets five, another two, and another one. Then the master goes away for what we’re told is “a long time.” Upon his return he settles up the accounts. The first earned five more talents, doubling his return. The second made two more, also doubling his return. But the third slave, who had buried the talent, returns the single talent he was given—and gets a major tongue lashing for doing so.* Basically, “Use it or lose it!”

Does the punishment really fit the crime? It’s not like the poor guy lost the talent with which he was entrusted, or squandered it on wine, women, and song. He just didn’t make *more* money. Those of you who’ve seen the stock market plummet every now and then might view this slave as an economic genius. At least he didn’t *lose* any money!

But this parable isn’t just about money. Ultimately, we are stewards not only of our money, or our time and talents (meaning skills and abilities), but also of the Gospel itself. And the question is: what will we do with the faith with which God has entrusted us? Will we, like someone who doesn’t trust banks, bury it? Or like the super-wealthy, hoard it? Or will we use our faith and share it with others? Jesus is telling us there’s a choice to be made.

Thus, we can interpret this parable as being about how we can be the best stewards of the God-given gifts we have been offered and with which we have been entrusted. This starts with our very life, the greatest gift God offers us. Do we do what is necessary to make the most of it through service to God and one another or do we spend our time predominantly looking downward and inward, burying ourselves in the process? Do we accept our God-given gifts and talents (here, I’m using the word in our conventional sense) or do we downplay or ignore what has been entrusted to us? Our natural inclination may be to bury our gifts and talents along with our faith—take the easy, more comfortable way out. Instead of using them joyfully and making ourselves vulnerable by challenging ourselves, we bury them, living in fear of failure. We bury our gifts and talents because it’s safer that way. Nothing ventured, nothing risked. Also, nothing gained.

So, what *do* we do with our faith? Scripture reinforces the notion that faith can never be a private matter. It’s not like a voting booth where you go in and draw the curtain (which I certainly hope most of you did on November 7). Faith *affects* every action we take, and in turn, whatever we say or do *reflects* our faith. Sharing that faith with others—by word and example—is essential to being in authentic relationship with Jesus Christ.

This can be expressed in a number of ways. You don’t have to go knock on some stranger’s door, hand out religious tracts, or stand on a streetcorner and preach. Even so, faith is not passive. You can’t accept Christ through faith, then bury it deep in your heart, and do nothing with it. And that’s what makes it so challenging to be a disciple of Jesus. It requires action; it asks us to take up our own cross and follow our calling—whatever that may be, deploying whatever gifts we may have.

So, on this Stewardship Sunday, I encourage you to ask yourself honestly: How can I best use my personal gifts and talents, as well as my time, prayers—and yes, money—in the service of my Christian faith? And how can I use my giftedness to glorify God at St. John’s Church, Compass?

Because to take a miserly approach to the faith, gifts, and talents God has given us is to act like the slave in today’s parable. It’s to bury or hide what we’ve been given, such that these have no effect whatsoever on anyone—even ourselves.

As we head into Advent in a couple of weeks, we’ll likely hear on TV or elsewhere about the classic miser, Ebenezer Scrooge—that cold-hearted, tight-fisted, selfish banker of Charles Dickens’ fame. He who despised Christmas and all the attendant happiness; who even resented giving his clerk the day off for the Lord’s Nativity; and who had only contempt for the poor. Of course, Scrooge does repent and all ends well. But his old ways exemplify the improper approach to practicing our faith: Take all the God-given talents and reject gratefulness; reject community; reject joy.

That’s what happens when we bury our faith. But that’s not what Jesus wants for us. Just as He called Lazarus out of the grave, He calls faith out of our souls. It’s hard not to view the master in this parable as a bit Scrooge-like. And I’m not sure we can automatically equate the master in Jesus’ story with God. I don’t see God ripping what He has out of the hands of the poor and handing it over to the rich; God isn’t the anti-Robin Hood. Even so, Jesus *is* reminding us that as His followers we do have responsibilities that can’t be ignored.

I have a feeling the master in this story might have been more forgiving if the slave had *tried* to use his talent to make it grow but had lost the money in the process. The slave approached his master out of an attitude of fear. “I knew that you were a harsh man, so I was afraid,” he says. His fear paralyzed him, and getting stuck in that fear caused him to turn inward and bury it. Out of sight, out of mind. But inaction and the inability to move past our own anxieties—or the refusal to ask God to *help us* step out of the box—shows a lack of trust in God.

The other two slaves approached their master out of an attitude of gratitude. They were entrusted with responsibility and in turn sought to show their gratitude for what they were offered.

These represent fundamentally different approaches to God. One is fearful and selfish, the other trusting and thankful. One dwells on God’s wrath, the other on God’s loving mercy.

This sermon has gone from my inability to handle money well (although I know how to *spend it* just fine!) with a lot of questions in between, and a tough parable to boot. But Jesus’ point is: Don’t bury your treasure. We each have a choice to make. God has entrusted every one of us with many things in varying amounts: money, natural talents, spiritual gifts—and above all, the saving truth of the Gospel. He expects us not just to conserve these things by burying them, but to nurture them, grow them, use them, and watch them bear fruit—for His Kingdom.

So what’s holding you back? Are you the servant who’s been given a lot and are afraid to *lose it*? Or are you the one who feels you’ve only been given a little, and you’re afraid to *use it*? Maybe you’re embarrassed about your bank balance, or you think your gifts and talents aren’t up to par, so why bother? “I’m not a great cook, so I won’t contribute to coffee hour.” “I’m not a trained singer, so why volunteer for choir?” “I don’t like getting dirty outside, so why would I help the cemetery preservation team?” And so on.

Every single person in this congregation and among our staff and leadership has been gifted by God with *exactly* what we should have—no more, and no less. And the Lord expects us to use those gifts (of every kind) to the fullest. After all, look what happened to the poor shlub who didn’t do anything with his. You don’t want Jesus coming back soon and asking: “Why didn’t you nurture, grow, use, and watch your gifts bear fruit?” Do you?

Let us pray: Father in Heaven, through your Holy Spirit give us Your grace, wisdom, and discernment to get over ourselves for the sake of Your Kingdom. Grant us courage, strength, and endurance to give our lives passionately and devotedly for the glory of Your Son Jesus Christ and the welfare of Your people. This we ask in His Most Holy Name. *Amen.*