

Sermon: A Talent for Listening

Year A, Proper 28

[Zephaniah 1:7,12-18; Psalm 90:1-8, \(9-11\), 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30](#)

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We're going to have a harvest celebration at the end of November for our Stewardship campaign. But before then, of course we're going to do the Parable of the Talents. Because how perfect is it? *To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability* (Matthew 25:15). *'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things.'* (Matthew 25:21) *For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance;'* (Matthew 25:29) It's what we teach our kids. Make the most of your gifts, work hard and you'll get more responsibility, those who have an abundance have a responsibility to make life easier for those who don't have as much. Don't squander the gifts you've been given.¹ The sermon practically writes itself.

And it would. Except for this part.

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. (Matthew 25:24-27)

When we skip over that bit about reaping where you do not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, we hear the message of capitalism that we've been raised in. Don't get me wrong. I'm a total fan-girl of capitalism. It has moved more people out of poverty than any other mechanism we have come up with. Capital is simply a tool. We can use it for good or for evil. So I get why this parable is used for stewardship all the time. Heck, in English "talent" meaning "a special natural ability or aptitude" or "a capacity for achievement or success" comes from this parable.² In Greek *talenta* is so many pounds of precious metal. So we took this story about ridiculous sums of money, one talent is roughly 15 years wages for a peasant, we took this story and made that word "talent" mean "abilities," "aptitude," "capacity." It absolutely fits with what we believe, what the world believes, about how we're supposed to conduct ourselves. How the world works.

But there is that part in the middle. Basically, in a subsistence agricultural economy, which Roman Israel was, there's only one way to end up with 120 years worth of wages in liquid assets: exploit the farmers who live on the land. The only way to double your money is to exploit the farmers who live on the land. The best way to do that is to loan farmers the money, at interest rates which ranged from 60-200%, hoping they will default.³ When they do, toss them

¹ Mark Douglas, "Proper 28, Theological Perspective, Matthew 25:14-30" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 308.

² Douglas, 308.

³ William R. Herzog II, *Parables as Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 161.

off the land, convert it to a cash crop and keep the cycle going. It lets you reap where you do not sow and gather where you do not scatter. Or you can give the cash to someone else to do that and give you a cut of the interest, despite the fact that Jewish law prohibits charging interest.⁴

It's going to be hard to get at what Jesus meant to teach us in this parable, hard to hear his message because there are so many thousands of years of our own interpretation and chatter drowning out his message. But the tough passage in the middle of the parable is about exploitation and about standing up to exploitation and the terrible toll that standing up takes.

There may also be a bit of teaching about asking the exploited to look at the system which exploits them and identify the key links in the system that might bend another way and change everything. The third slave buries the one talent. He takes its exploitative power out of the system.⁵ The aristocrat needs those three slaves to use his wealth to make more wealth by exploiting even more peasants.⁶ What if the peasants worked with them to take the power of exploitation away from the aristocrat, perhaps by doing something as crazy as following the Biblical laws against lending at high interest rates? Jesus was always one to swing for the fences.

Maybe that bit about changing an exploitative system is just wishful thinking. It's hard to know because there are so many layers of interpretation between us and Jesus standing in Jerusalem shortly before his betrayal and crucifixion. But the tough bit of the Scripture, the part about reaping where you do not sow and gathering where you do not scatter, is in there. We have to listen to it. We have to let it jar our ears and make us look at all those layers of interpretation and say, "wait a minute, am I really hearing what's going on here?"

Back in January, we decided to actively work on sharing what we have with the community around us, share in a new and more personal way. We wanted to become more active stewards of the blessings of the Holy Spirit we have been finding here at the Brookline Community Church. One of the keys to that, I believe, is saying to people, "I think you would like my church. I'd like to invite you to come with me."

For that statement to be authentic, we need to be able to share why we like our church and why we think the other person would like it. As we have shared our family stories, as we have shared activities, including ones like tonight's games after dinner, we are getting to know each other much more personally and on a much deeper level. I think we have been building a much clearer understanding of what we find so nourishing in this church.

With these deeper connections, I think we are more capable of putting our fingers on why someone else would like our church. But then we come to the second part of the statement, "I'd like to invite you to come with me." For many of us, that is a stomach tightening moment full of dread. We can recommend books or movies, invite people to come to concerts or try a recipe, but inviting someone to church just seems too tough. Fair enough.

So I'd like to offer a simple exercise in listening, both to someone else and to yourself. I know we have the talents to have those conversations, to share those invitations, but I know we have to help each other. In your bulletin, you'll find a red insert. It will fit in your billfold. With

⁴ Herzog, 166.

⁵ Herzog, 167.

⁶ Herzog, 167.

Christmas coming up, people will likely talk about the holidays. On the red piece of paper is a question, phrased two ways: Was there a religious or spiritual background to your childhood? What was “church” like?

Find someone who doesn’t go to this church, preferably someone whose answers you don’t already know, and ask them. On the question side of the sheet, jot down some of the phrases they use to describe the church or religious life they remember. That will help us as a group build up a collection of images from people who are not already here. It will help us to hear what they are really saying and tune our invitations to speak their language.

On the other side of the piece of paper, jot down what listening to them brought up for you. Some of it will be memories of your own of similar experiences. Some of it may be sorrow that they had really negative experiences or no experiences of a faith tradition. Then reflect on what’s holding you back from inviting them to come to church with you. What we need as a community is to build our vocabulary of invitation in such a way that people really sense that we want to share something special, a place where their voices are heard, where their life experiences matter deeply because they are the foundation of the kingdom of God. It won’t be easy and you may not like what you find out about yourself. But your candor will be so helpful.

When you’ve given that a try, put your red slip in the offering plate. If you’re willing to sign it, please do, since I may have questions as we flesh out what you’ve heard. But you don’t have to. Questions on what I’m inviting you to do?

So we give it a try. We listen. We hear stories different from our own. We connect those stories to our own. Or we don’t. But we listen. Not for what we want to hear, hope to hear, but for what is really there. Because when we really listen, we catch a glimpse of the incredible talents and wealth which surround us, here and now, in the emerging kingdom of God.