

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (A)

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25:14-30

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Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, which we read at the close of the liturgical year, we hear a number of parables that have to do with the time of waiting for the Lord to return. Last week we heard about the bridesmaids — wise and foolish — waiting for the bridegroom to come.

This week's parable is the story of the rich man who gives talents to three of his servants and then sets out on a journey. Upon his return, he summons his servants in order to receive an accounting of their stewardship.

He then discovers that the servant to whom he had given five talents, had invested them fruitfully. Likewise, the servant to whom he had given two talents had also invested them wisely. But he discovers, much to his disappointment, that the servant to whom he had entrusted one talent, had simply buried it in the ground. And so, consequently that servant had earned *absolutely nothing* — not even a small amount of interest. Angered, the man then orders that this one talent be taken away from the timid servant, and be given to the servant who had doubled the five talents. And then comes the devastating pronouncement: "*For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away*" (Mt 25:29).

The standard reading of this parable, is that the talents symbolize gifts and abilities that God has entrusted to us, and that he expects us to "spend" generously or "invest" wisely. And that is no doubt true enough.

This past week though, I came upon an additional insight from the Old Testament professor at Mundelhein Seminary, Robert Schoenstene. In the time of Christ, a "talent" was a measure of something particularly *weighty* — usually silver or gold. A single talent might represent as much as fifty pounds of precious metal, and so it wasn't like a coin that you could carry in your pocket. It would be more like a solid bar of gold or silver.

What the modern-day person typically misses, but what a first-century Jew would have likely realized, is the connection to *heaviness*. A talent was *weighty*. And a measurement of *five talents*, was *very weighty indeed*.

Heaviness would have brought to mind for a Jew, the heaviest weight of all, which was the "kabod" of the LORD. "Kabod" is the Hebrew word which we translate as *glory*, but it literally means "*weight*" or "*weightiness*." In English the word "glory" is typically associated with things like honor and majesty, sometimes with light or brilliance. But again the basic sense of the Hebrew word, is *heaviness*, or *gravitas*.

Moreover, this *kabod* of the LORD — this *glory* of the LORD — was to be found in the Jerusalem Temple, resting upon the mercy seat, within the Holy of Holies. Therefore, from a Jewish perspective, what was *heaviest*, what was *most glorious* of all, was the *mercy of God*. The mercy of the LORD, which abided in infinite, inexhaustible abundance in the Holy Temple.

With that added insight, we can read and hear today's parable with fresh eyes and ears. The talents entrusted to the three servants, are not so much monetary gifts or personal capacities then, as they are *a share in the glory or mercy of God* — a participation in the *weightiness of God's merciful love*.

But since mercy is always directed outwards — always directed to the other, these “talents” entrusted to the servants are *meant to be shared*. In fact, the talents will increase, precisely in the measure that they are *given away*.

The problem with the timid servant — the problem with the one who buried his talent — is not that he was an ineffective businessman. Rather, the problem is that he fundamentally misunderstood the nature of what he had been given. *God's love* — *God's mercy* — is received as a *pure gift*. And God's love — God's mercy — is likewise *meant to be given to others as pure gift*. God's mercy is always meant to be passed on.

But buried in the ground — which is to say, hugged tightly to oneself as one's own possession — such a talent disappears. It fades away.

And that is why the master's seemingly harsh words should *not* be read so much as the punishment of an angry God. Rather, they are more of a simple expression of a deep spiritual truth: *God's love* — *God's mercy* — will *grow in you*, to the extent that you pass it on to others. To “have” the glory of the LORD — to have God's mercy — is not to have it as a private possession — it is to pass it on.

All of us baptized people, have been entrusted with the *weighty love* of God. We've all been entrusted with the treasure of God's mercy. God's love — his grace — has brought us to faith. And now the Lord wants us to invest his love. He wants us to pass it on, so that others too will come to faith in Jesus. And he wants us to pass his love on, lest the faith disappear from our own lives.

There is the danger that — like the third servant — we will just bury it. Indeed, we are tempted to bury the faith in the privacy of our own life. “Oh, it's just mine. I don't want other people to know about it. I'm afraid to talk about it. Who wants to hear from me? It's my private concern.” With that kind of an attitude, the faith can just fade away.

Again, the strange paradox is, if you want faith to grow, *spread it, speak it, act out of it*. Give it away. Share the Gospel. Share God's love and mercy in Christ Jesus, and not only will the faith grow elsewhere, it will grow in you.

It is evangelism, and it is a central calling and purpose of *all of the baptized*

— of all Christians. Is it a risky business, evangelism? Yes, in some ways it is. That's why this image of investing is used in the parable. Jesus never promised it would be easy, or without risk.

Is it hard to do in this day and age? Well, it can be. We now live in a very diverse culture, and we have learned therefore the etiquette of a pluralistic society. One of the things you don't talk about publicly is religion. Right? We tend to mute ourselves when it comes to matters of the faith.

But as 21st-century Christians living in America, we **cannot** buy into that. We must resist it. Because such an attitude is tantamount to burying our faith in the ground. It is tantamount to burying God's love and his mercy, and hiding it away. And that is the sure way, to make it disappear.

So how do we serve as evangelists? How do we witness to the love and mercy of God in Christ? It's certainly not effective to be pushy, or self-righteous.

But we might begin, by simply confronting that censor that hovers around our lips most of the time — that self-censor that says "*No don't talk about Jesus or faith. Don't mention God. That might offend somebody. That's kind of embarrassing.*" Get rid of that censor. You're not harming anyone if you say something like, "*What a beautiful day; thank God.*" Or if you speak to a colleague at work about something from worship, or from Sunday School, or from your own devotional reading. If you were to say, "*Well I have this new opportunity, and I think it might be a good way for me to serve God,*" is that embarrassing? Well, maybe a little bit. Will people look at you funny? Perhaps. So what? It's a very natural and easy way, to help spread the seeds of faith, to spread the good news. It is a way for you to invest your talent.

Maybe you want to consciously wear a cross or a crucifix around your neck, or on a cross pin in your lapel. Perhaps it'll be a conversation starter. Or maybe it will be a quiet symbol of hope for somebody who needs that. Maybe it will simply be a bit of encouragement to another Christian that they're not alone.

It's not showing off. It need not be embarrassing. But it is a simple public witness, to God's love in Jesus.

Do you pray before meals — especially when you are out at a restaurant? Again, not to be a show off. Not to say, "*Hey, look at me! See how religious I am?!*" No. But simply as a way to give thanks to God, **publicly** — to bow your head, maybe make the sign of the cross — and bear public witness that you don't take your blessings for granted.

I know that can be difficult, I know it can be a bit embarrassing. But, it might get someone's attention. It might remind them of the faith — maybe the faith they have forgotten or neglected. It might encourage them. Who knows? It is a way — quietly and simply — of witnessing publicly. Of spending — of investing — the talents of your faith.

God's love in Christ Jesus is **very good news** — it is the **best news!** Is

there someone — maybe a friend or a relative — who’s been away from Church. Invite them back. Encourage them.

Is it risky? Well, maybe. But is it worth the risk? *Absolutely!*

Spend your faith. Risk it. Invest it. When you do that, you’ll actually help it to grow. And the master will indeed then say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

In the name of the Father, and of the ✝ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Credits: Robert Barron