

**Matthew 25: 14-30
Creekside COB
November 20, 2005**

Well Done!

In case you are wondering, the sermon title is not my stated preference for steak. If it were, the title would be, “Medium Done!”

“Well done!” Who doesn’t like to hear these words? We like hearing them from the boss after we complete a challenging project. “Well done!” These are words children love to hear when their parents read their report cards. “Well done!” These are words are music to cooks who go all out to prepare a special meal for their friends.

***“Well done good and faithful servant!”* Will we hear these words when the Ancient of Days reviews the days of our lives. The week is set aside for gratitude and taking inventory of the resources and relationships with which we have been blessed beyond measure. We didn’t ask for them. We certainly aren’t entitled to them, yet God, has given them to us just the same.**

The question before us on this Thanksgiving and Stewardship Dedication Sunday is straightforward. What will we do with what we have been given? This is the question we ask ourselves in response to the parable you just heard.

If you have nothing better to do sometime, take a swig of sweet, Welch’s grape juice, and then chase it down with a gulp of grapefruit juice. I see some of you puckering at the thought of it. Jesus’ parable of the talents goes down easy... at first, but at the end, the puckering begins.

There was a *man of means* who left town for an unspecified time to an unknown destination. He called his three servants

and distributed his assets between them—five talents to the first, two to the second, and one to the third.

He didn't want them to just *mind* his money. He wanted them to do something with it. "See *what you can make with it*," he said. Two of the servants did well... very well. They did market research. They diversified their investments. They bought low and sold high. They took calculated risks that paid big dividends.

The third servant had no stomach for wheeling and dealing. He couldn't bear the thought of losing the talent. A talent wasn't pocket change. Some commentaries say it was the equivalent of a lifetime's wages. There was no way he was going to give the talent to a slick guy in a pinstriped suit from Smith-Barney. Burying it in the ground was better than seeing it evaporate on the stock exchange.

When the boss returned, he called the servants into his office. "How did you do?" he asked. With a smile, the first two said, "We didn't do too bad, sir. We only managed to *double* your money." "That's what I like to hear!" the boss said. "WELL DONE my good and faithful servants."

"And you?" He said to the third servant. "What return did you get?" "Well, sir-- there's been a lot of market volatility lately, and, uhhh..." "Uhhh what?" the master said. "What did you earn?" "Wellllllll... its like this. I was afraid of what would happen if I lost it, so... I uhhhhh.... I buried it. Here you go. It's all there, down to the penny." And the boss chewed him out, gave the talent to the other servants, and threw him into the darkness. The End.

If you like to cheer for the little guy, this is a pucker parable. It seems to say, "*Them that has, gets.*" Jesus didn't mention the kind of investments the two servants made. It could have been ill-gotten gain, but this wasn't the boss's concern. We're uneasy tying the Kingdom of heaven to success and rewards. Most of us have lived long enough to know that hard, earnest, honest work doesn't *always* yield big returns. And isn't there

something to be said about responsibility for our resources? Investing faithfully doesn't mean investing foolishly.

Have you ever been told you're gifted? It's easy to spot some of the gifted folks in our church. But God hasn't gifted just them. God has gifted us all. We aren't gifted equally. Not everyone can play an instrument, make sense of a church budget, bake communion bread, teach Sunday school, or fix the church furnace. But everyone with something to be used to serve God.

Let's consider giftedness from the big perspective. In the hymn, "*Great is Thy Faithfulness*," we sing, "All I have needed thy hand hath provided..." Consider what "all" encompasses. We have everything needed to live-- food to sustain us, clothes to cover us, homes to shelter us, money to provide for us, families who love us, friends who support us, Christian brothers and sisters to care for us, encourage us, and pray for us, doctors and medicines to help heal us, public servants who protect us, spiritual mentors who guide us, earth's beauty and bounty that delights and sustains us, God who always loves us, Jesus who died for us and will never leave us.

What about our skills, talents, and spiritual gifts? Where did they come from? ALL we have needed God's hand has provided. What then shall we do with what we have been given?

I have friends whose teenage son gets straight A's, is a star athlete, and an excellent musician. A parent's dream child, full of promise, but his mom has her hands folded and her fingers crossed. She says, "*Michael will either be a Nobel aureate or a kingpin in organized crime.*"

We choose how to use the gifts God has given. So why did the third servant bury his talent and not invest it? FEAR. "What did you do with the talent, servant?" "Nothing, sir. I was afraid, so I buried it."

Paul said, *“The wages of sin is death.”* If death is the wages of sin, what are the wages of fear? Consider it in the context of love. The rock singer Jay Giles wrote a song titled—*“Love Stinks!”* It’s not hard to imagine how he reached his conclusion. In the book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis wrote:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal.

Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change.

It will not become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell.

There was a message Jesus had to keep repeating-- *“Fear not.” “Don’t be afraid.” “Don’t be anxious.” “Let not your hearts be troubled.”* Fear makes us live in the fetal position. It keeps our gifts hidden. It paralyzes us. Barbara Taylor describe its impact:

Fear is a small cell with no air in it and no light. It is suffocating inside and dark. There is no room to turn around inside it. You can only face in one direction, but it hardly matters since you cannot see anyhow. There is no future in the dark. Everything is over. Everything is past. When you are locked up like that, tomorrow is as far away as the moon.

Ohio State’s legendary football coach, Woody Hayes, seldom used passing in his offensive game plan. His strategy was, *“Three yards and a cloud of dust.”* He was asked why Ohio

State didn't pass more often. He answered, "When you pass the ball, three things can happen, and two of them are bad."

Fear robs God's people of the adventures that are possible if we would only step out in faith. But what if I use my talent and nothing happens? What if it isn't recognized? What if it's all used up? What if I do something wrong and it's taken from me? What then? Then we remember that our gifts *aren't ours* in the first place. They are God's, and they can't be lost. They are given for building the church and equipping us to serve him.

We can't lose them. However, they can be taken from us. If we sit on them, if we don't exercise our faith, they can be redistributed. *"Take the talent from this spineless servant and give it to the one with ten talents."* For to everyone who has will more be given, but from those who have not, even what they have will be taken away.

Lots of churches our size suffer from W.K.S.... White Knuckle Syndrome. The symptoms include: clutching pews, hymnals, and fellow members to minimize the risk of change and make sure no one leaves and no one will want to come in. The result of clutching is the loss of the very things W.K.S. sufferers try to preserve.

To date there are no confirmed cases at Creekside. As Ted Noffsinger said last Sunday, we have undertaken ambitious ventures, any one of which many churches would be reluctant to try. We did it because we didn't know any better. We took chances in faith, and God helped us accomplish what some said was beyond our grasp. We invested and God provided. Two capital campaigns, a re-location, land purchase, a new facility well on the way to completion

Let me lift up something we tried the first time last fall. You were asked to make your financial support of the church a matter of prayer... a decision arrived at between you and God. The board presented a budget of projected ministry expenses, and you pledged your support in a sealed

envelope. No one opened it. No one but you and God knew the amount.

In recent years at this time of year we ran average deficits of So far this year, we are only behind by only a little. We believed that if we stepped out in faith and responded on the basis of how God has blessed us, that God would provide. God did. You offered yourselves and your resources, and I am grateful for your support. Your motivation was not the promise of a reward. You were generous for the sake of being part of what God is creating through us.

The actor, Dennis Quaid starred in a recent movie called, "The Rookie." It was based on a true story about a high school baseball coach in a small Texas town. He dreamed of playing professional baseball. He tried out, but didn't make it. He ended up coaching a bunch of underachievers who didn't believe they could win. Both the coach and his players were crippled by the fear and restricted thinking.

Then one day on the practice field a miracle happened. While pitching batting practice, the coach's arm suddenly had more power than it ever had. His players were amazed by the velocity of his pitches, and kept at him to try out for a major league team. He decided to try, but his prospect of success would be tied to theirs. If the team could win a district baseball title, he would try out. Well, they did, and they told their coach. "Now, it's your turn."

This man who now had a wife and family, never thought he would realize his dream, but larger forces were at work. He tried out for a minor league team and was drafted. Afterward, he pitched two complete seasons in the major leagues. He decided to lay it on the line, put aside his fear, and everyone benefited from it.

Our Master has gone away for a while. He entrusted us with his spiritual capital, we don't know when he'll be back. We simply take him at his word that he will. Regardless when we

meet him, the best thing we can hope to hear is, ***“Well done, good and faithful servant.”***

Our motivation isn't the promise of a reward. We give with generous hearts for the sake of being part of what God is creating through us. Our decision is not out of fear, but faith.