

Matthew 25:14-30
Creekside COB
November 23, 2008

Extravagance and Insufficiency

Depending upon the point of reference, we see the same things differently. The earth would seem an enormous place if you walked around it. The walk would take two years and eleven months. But if you walked the circumference of Canis Majoris, the largest known star in the universe, the stroll would take 650,000 years! It's a matter of perspective.

When you are young time stands still. You want to get on with your life. It takes forever to turn sixteen so you can drive. Graduation can't come quick enough so you can get out from under the parent's roof and be your own boss. But as years go by, time no longer crawls-- it flies! You change your baby girl's diaper and before you know it, you're dancing with her at her wedding. You realize there isn't time to do all that you want in life. You frequent doctor's offices and funerals more often. The march of time is a matter of perspective.

A sloth was lumbering through the jungle one day and was mugged by a gang of snails. Beaten and confused, it took hours to get to the police station and report the assault. A detective asked the sloth to describe the assailants. He replied, "I didn't get a good look at them... *it all happened so fast.*" It's a matter of perspective.

A college student emailed her parents: "Dear Mom and Dad. I'm sorry it's been so long since you've heard from me. Things have been hectic here. There was a fire in my dorm. Trying to escape I fell from a second-story window and suffered a concussion. I didn't tell you because I knew you would worry. My vision is still blurred, but getting better. I met a very nice man. He was riding

by the dorm on his Harley and saw me fall. When I was released from the hospital he asked me to move in with him so he could care of me. I know you'll like him. He's got the coolest tattoos. You'll be happy to know you'll be grandparents in seven months. You'll meet Cooter when I'm home for Thanksgiving. In closing, please don't worry-- there wasn't a fire, I didn't get a concussion, and there's no Cooter or a baby. I told you this because I got a D in chemistry and an F in calculus, *and I wanted you to keep things in perspective.*"

Perspective is an important interpretive tool when studying the Bible. The Parable of the Talents is a case in point. The message has different facets when seen from the perspective of the four personalities.

But before we begin let's admit our bias. We don't care for this parable. We don't like the way the one talent servant is treated. We cheer for the underdog. We love it when the little guy puts one over on Mr. Big. We identify with the third servant. Our resources are small compared to the wealthy who got that way because they wheeled and dealt for a living. We're responsible. We aren't rash or careless with our resources. We protect what we've got and hide it when necessary. In Jesus' day, burying money was considered a wise and prudent thing to do. The servant probably thought the Master would praise him for returning all the money safe and sound. Instead, the Master gave me a verbal thrashing. He called him wicked and slothful. He ordered the poor guy cast into the darkness to sob and grind his teeth to the gums. From the servant's perspective, the parable poses a problem; so let's examine it from another perspective.

First, consider the meaning of a "talent." It comes from the Greek word, *talanta*. Contrary to our understanding, it has nothing to do with gifts or abilities. We all have something to contribute in building up the church. But a *talanta* isn't about your ability to sing in worship, tap dance, make quilt squares, or whistle Dixie as a way to lend God a hand.

A *talanta* was an enormous sum of money. It was the largest denomination of currency in Jesus' day. A talent's worth of

silver weighed seventy-five pounds. Five talents was fifteen years worth of wages.

The servant buried the talent entrusted to him, but prudence wasn't the major motive. "I know you, sir. You are a hard man. You try to squeeze blood out of turnips. You drive hard bargains. You expect a lot of your servants, and I WAS AFRAID." This servant didn't know his Master.

Servants one and two had nerves that could take risks. They studied the stock indices like hawks. They traded. They doubled the investments and won the master's admiration -- "*Well done, good and faithful servants.*" But they won more than praise. When they gave the money back, the Master said, "Keep it." "Keep it? You mean the interest?" "No, I mean the interest *and the principle.* It's yours."

Does this sound like a hard-hearted master to you? Who would turn over everything and say, "See what you can do with it," and upon his return ask for an accounting and then give it all to them? Hard masters don't operate like this. It was an exercise in extravagance. The one talent servant didn't know his Master. He didn't know what made him tick.

Our Master Jesus was nearing the end of the road when he told this parable. He told it with great urgency as if our lives and God's Kingdom depended on it. "I'm going to leave you. I don't know how long I'll be gone, but I'll be back, and while I'm away I want you to do something for me. I will give you the most precious thing I've got and I want you to do something with it."

Imagine Secretary of the Treasury, Henry Paulson going before Congress to request \$700 billion, not for Wall Street, but for Tom and Betty Lamb. Earlier, I talked about perspective. If you counted one dollar bills, one per second, how long would it take to reach \$700 billion? If you had the time, it would take 21,000 years! What would Tom and Betty do with that staggering amount of money? They wouldn't have a clue. It would overwhelm them, although I'm sure there wouldn't be a shortage of people eager to advise them.

Jesus said the talents were given to the servants, *each according to his ability*. The servant with the 75 pound bucket of silver didn't have ability equal to the task. He was afraid of the gift and the giver. He didn't USE it lest he LOSE it, so he buried it, and gave it all back when the boss returned. *This is what happens when extravagance meets insufficiency.*

I want you to "suppose" something with me. For the sake of yet *another* perspective, let's suppose that talents stand for something else. What if "talents" is code for "the gospel?" What would the price tag say? \$700 billion? It's the pearl the merchant sold everything to get. *It is more precious than silver -- more costly than gold.* It's priceless.

What are we supposed to do with something priceless? How about admitting that we don't know how to handle it? In the church we pretend we're capable of handling whatever comes along. We turn the gospel into "church work", and that's something we can handle in the administration of manageable transactions. Organize worship and education. Help benevolent causes. Address the deficit, pay the bills, get done what must be done. Make projections. Ask for what's reasonable. Take what we get and manage it accordingly. What is that compared to God's extravagant love revealed in the gospel of Jesus? It's insufficient.

Pastor James Howell says, "Maybe what God needs is people who will huddle up, shake their heads and confess, 'We just have no idea; the treasure is too big, too heavy.'" It's about extravagance and insufficiency. Great time and effort went into choosing a new name for our church, and I wonder if its time for another change. How about, *The Community of the Clueless?* What could become of us if we would admit the gospel is too big and too loaded and way beyond our ability to handle?

I don't know all the implications, but I know there are implications. We might learn that it is not by our know-how that the gospel is freed to do its transforming work. We might learn that where we are unable, God is able.

Every time we reduce the gospel into something doable, we throw a shovel-full of dirt on the treasure we've put at the bottom of the hole. Every time we say that it is someone else's responsibility to grow the church and share the good news, we throw in another shovel-full. Every time we respond to big tasks with excuses and choruses of "We can't," another shovel-full goes in. When we think that outreach is something the Outreach Team does, more dirt goes in. Every time we give plausible reasons why we aren't going where the hurting and hungering live, the shovel deposits more fill. Every time we treat tithing as scriptural but not practical given the circumstances, the soil inches to the top. Every time we exchange the risk that comes with doing what cannot be done without God, for that which makes us comfortable, satisfied, and solvent, the hole is filled and raked. The talent is buried and the church along with it. And when the Master returns he will ask what's been done with the extravagant gift entrusted to us. What will we say?

There are advantages to not knowing. When you don't know, you don't have anything to lose. When you have nothing to lose you have everything to gain.

For those who came today for a Thanksgiving sermon, here it is. I learned from someone in Alcoholics Anonymous, that "gratitude" isn't a word. Gratitude is more than saying "Thank you," for an act of generosity you've received. Gratitude isn't an outlook, an attitude, or state of mind. Gratitude is an action. Gratitude is expressed in concrete acts on behalf of God and others.