

HOW ARE YOU MANAGING?

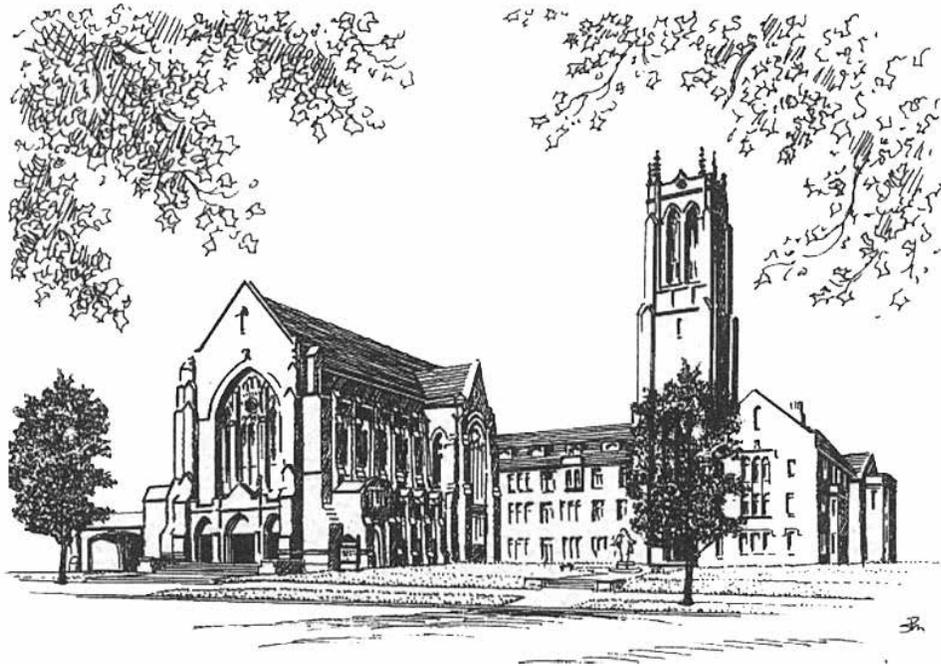
by

Rev. Thomas A. (Tommy) Williams

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Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

11:05 a.m.



ST. PAUL'S

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Texts: Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123 or Psalm 76; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; and Matthew 25:14-30

I have to admit that when planning our stewardship season this year, I did not realize that this parable of the talents would fall within it. Believe or not!

God works through the lectionary friends! Praise God.

So, if you were to take inventory right now, what would you say has been entrusted to your care?

What are those people and things that have been uniquely given to you to care for?

What treasures, what gifts, what talents, what people, what work, what land, what has God entrusted to you? Spouses, children, grandchildren, best friends, your business, your classroom, your work, your home, your family heritage, your land, whatever it may be.

Each one of them is a treasure and I am convinced that life would be better and the world a better place if we treated our beloveds like the treasures they are – for they have indeed been entrusted to us by God.

There are varying interpretations of this parable, as you can imagine. Maybe you've got your own theories. In these allegories of Jesus we are left to imagine who is what character. I tend to think that the most obvious interpretations are usually the intended ones; although they are not in every case obvious.

We tend to look for alternative interpretations when there are troublesome aspects of the parable, and we search for some alternative that doesn't make us squirm as much. I want to invite us to consider that Matthew's version of Jesus' teaching is meant for us to take seriously our stewardship rather than to scare us into submission.

Most of us can accept that Jesus might be the master who has gone away for a while and entrusted the church and the world to disciples until he returns again.

It starts getting difficult when the master returns and rewards some and not one in a rather unceremonious fashion into a famous conclusion for Matthew – the weeping and gnashing of teeth. Not at all what we'd like to imagine.

In this parable, one of the difficult ones, is the harsh treatment of the third servant.

Rabbinic law stipulated that burying a talent was the best safeguard against theft and that when one buries entrusted money one is free from liability for it. The one-talent man has been prudent.

In the uncertain economic world in which this parable was first told, its hearers may well have identified with the one-talent man, as do many of us. I can in fact remember hearing this parable for the first time as a child and guessing that it was the one-talent servant who got it right!

I want to suggest that our reading of these parables says more about us than about much else — our image of God, our discomforts with ourselves and our talents and perhaps other things.

We would like to think of the life of stewardship as safe and risk free. I give and offer what I can manage, and we are often risk-adverse and sell ourselves short.

The third servant showed his cards early. He assumed he would know his master's response, and it became a sort of self-fulfilling prophesy. Before the master has said or done anything judgmental, the third servant has pegged him as such.

There is a sense in which each one in the parable was given what the master thought they could handle. The master knows the gifts and limitations of his servants, but even so, the master expects each to work with what they've been given.

And, "to each was given according to each one's ability." Or, the Greek could be translated, "according to one's own power."

And sometimes we underestimate the extent of our own ability and power.

Don't you love seeing people who make the most of their abilities? Whether it is the José Altuve or Craig Biggio, athletes of the world who aren't the biggest or strongest but maximize their abilities.

Or the musician who may not have the flare or charisma but who prepares and performs with the best of their power. I love witnessing this phenomenon.

They have taken the talents given to them and multiplied them. Sometimes we underestimate the extent of our own ability and power. You've heard it said perhaps. It comes from novelist Marianne Williamson.

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?'

"Actually, who are you not to be?"

"You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

I wonder if it wasn't that for the third servant. He was paralyzed by fear and was not able to trust the relationship with the master; and it was a cascade from there.

I read Williamson not as suggesting we be too grandiose about ourselves or focused on self but, as the letter to the Thessalonians said — to remember that you are children of the light, not of darkness. You have been given talents, 1, 2 or 10. Treasure and work with the gifts you've been given.

A talent was a unit of measurement originally, measuring gold or silver. One talent equaled about 6,000 denarii. A denarii was one day's wages, so 6,000 denarii amounted to about twenty years' worth of wages. Not an insignificant amount of money.

Our understanding of talent is so skewed by our English usage of it so that we usually stretch its meaning beyond money, as I have done today.

When we think of talent we think of athletic talent, musical talents, aptitudes and gifts given to us by God for us to work with. And this is one way we can apply it.

But we leave out a crucial piece if we do not take its meaning quite directly. Our money is one of those treasures that God has trusted to you and me.

Today in worship represents an opportunity to make a pledge commitment to the mission of this church in the New Year. While you will have an opportunity to bring it over the next few weeks, today our parable speaks to stewardship over that which has been entrusted to us and our finances represent that.

What financial commitment could you give to multiply the mission of St. Paul's?

You have been given talent.

Our interpretation of the parable also usually individualizes the meaning. Two got it right and one got it wrong and faced the consequences. I want to suggest today that we also might stretch and think of our church as the recipient of talents and possibilities.

We stand on the shoulders of many, we under the Lordship of Christ. How are we together doing with what has been entrusted to us?

There is a wonderful old parable, not a Biblical one, that describes how when one comes before the judgment seat of God, God will not ask, "Why weren't you Abraham?" or "Why weren't you Moses?" or "Why weren't you like your neighbor or sister or friend?"

What God will want to know is, "Were you yourself?"

Did you do the best you could with what you had?

Did I, did we, take what was given to us and multiply it, or were we satisfied with what it is now?

The point of the parable is not to make something happen so God won't cast us out. The point is not to start producing because of fear of the master.

It is to "experience the joy of the master." And I love it when people have discovered that joy.

Once in a congregation I served we were in a similar stewardship season except this was to build a multi-purpose community center at the church. We were asking for pledges and all the rest when in that church one boy of nine-years-old told me he'd like to speak to the church that Sunday. He proceeded to announce to the church what he had to offer to the effort and asked if they might hire him to mow their lawns and work around their homes in order to multiply what he could offer.

Sounds right to me.

Just about two months ago, I received a phone call here at church from someone I didn't know at the time. They are not a part of this congregation but wanted to see me that day. He came into my office and offered a very generous gift to St. Paul's and wanted to tell me why.

He was a young teenager during the second World War and grew up near here. He was not a part of this church but as he and his friends would wander the streets in those days, they would happen into our church building and play in our gymnasium.

He looked me right in the eye and said to me — no matter how many times we came there we were never told to go away. We were never told we were being too noisy or that we didn't belong. We were never asked whether or not we were members of the church. And I've never forgotten about that welcome.

He continued to say that day he was driving by the church and said to himself, "you've never said thank you."

Seventy years later, he proceeded to call and come and offer that gift.
That gift joined with yours and mine as a community help to bring the joyful kingdom of God a bit closer.

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

Most Sunday sermons also are available via the church website, www.stpaulshouston.org, as well as pre-printed and on CD. Access the sermons on the website via either the Worship section or the Media Center. The pre-printed sermons are in the information rack at the Jones Plaza entrance to the Sanctuary Building. To order a \$5 CD of the complete worship service, contact Phyllis Brockermeyer at 713-528-0527 or pbrock@stpaulshouston.org.