

In the name of the God who bestows all our talents. Amen.

The comedian, Steven Wright once said, “I started off with nothing. I’ve still got most of it.” The same could be said of the servant with one talent this morning.

Jesus’ parable of the talents is another of those that most of us find very familiar. The landowner goes away on a trip and leaves the three servants in charge of his money, each getting a different amount – in accordance with his abilities – and when the landowner comes home there is the predictable day of reckoning.

Preachers often use this text to teach such lessons as, “don’t hide your light under a bushel basket, make sure you use your God-given talents.” But I think that undersells this parable by a long shot. This is a message about stewardship – making proper use of the things God has given us – there is no doubt about that. But it is, at its essence, a parable about faith and trust in God.

It helps, when we examine this parable, to have a basic understanding of Jesus’ world perspective. For example, it is helpful to know what a talent is. In ancient Palestine, a talent was equal to 3,000 sheckels. Now that we’ve cleared that up, we can move along. Actually, a talent was a unit of weight, indeed equal to 3,000 sheckels, which made it approximately equal to 70 pounds today. However, talents were also used to measure gold and silver and therefore became monetary units – just like the pound is a

unit of weight measurement and (until the euro) was the British monetary unit as well. I hunted everywhere, trying to find what a talent of gold would be worth today. I came up with varying amounts of from \$1,200,000.00 to \$1,000,000,000.

Most sources agree that what the landowner entrusted the servants with, was a very large sum of money – more than most would earn in a lifetime. So whatever it was that Jesus was analogizing to, must have been something of great worth. And it was. It was our selves – as the Rite I liturgy says, “our selves, our souls and bodies,” ... our very lives. The landowner (God) has entrusted us with the most precious gift God can give, the gift of life, and all that accompanies it. Now God has left us to use the lives that we have been given as we see fit and Jesus warns us that at some point we are going to have to account for our choices of use.

What was it that the five-talent servant and the two-talent servant did that was so much different than what their compatriot did? Quite simply, they cared enough about the Master’s wishes for them, and trusted enough in the Master’s love for them to take risks with what they had been given, throwing caution to the wind in hopes that they would reap a great reward on behalf of their Master. Meanwhile, the one-talent servant sat on the sidelines, and through his own faithlessness, did nothing to prepare for the return of his Master. Through inaction, he wasted an opportunity to use what his Master had entrusted him with to glorify the Master and to realize his own potential.

In the alternate Old Testament reading for this morning, we hear the priest, Zephaniah railing against the people of his day who didn't particularly care about God's wishes. He tells them, "(When the Lord comes) I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the people who rest complacently on their dregs, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do harm.'" It seems to me that what Zephaniah was talking about is a much bigger problem than just being paralyzed because one is afraid of God, like the one talent servant. After all, in the time of the prophets and judges, the children of Israel knew God as a god of great wrath and vengefulness, so the people were rightly told to fear God. But what Zephaniah's words really say to us is, "If you really want to make God mad, try being complacent. Try sitting back on your haunches and doing nothing while God is on His way to meet you." St. John, in the Revelation said the same thing when he said that lukewarm faith is what God despises. "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot." He says, "I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." Now while I don't believe that he meant God was *really* going to spit us out, it is clear that God does not want complacency. God wants faith. And faith always means taking chances.

Our problem is that we believe faith has to do with the depth and firmness of our belief in God. Nothing could be further from the truth. Christian author Ann Lamott said that, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith. The opposite of faith is certainty." The one-

talent servant had the opposite of faith; not fear of God, but rather certainty that taking a chance would be a bad thing. He had certainty that if he did anything wrong, he would be punished. And he let that certainty lead him into a sense of complacency. “If I just tie this money in a handkerchief and bury it, that will be enough. I won’t have to do anything else. I can sit back, wait until the master returns and I won’t get in any trouble.” Wrong! The Master wants us to take what we’ve been given – these lives of ours, and everything associated with them – and to risk them for the good of the Kingdom.

When the Vestry adopted a budget for 2008, they passed a deficit budget. Meaning that at the beginning of the year, we were already in a hole – income was not projected to cover expenses. When we passed that budget, we took a risk. I told the Vestry that I had faith that we would bring in more money than had been pledged – I was willing to risk it. And we have brought in more than was pledged. Not enough to cover our deficit, thanks to an extraordinary list of additional expenses for this year. But the risk was rewarded. Through you, God has provided, just as I had faith would happen. That’s why our stewardship campaign this year is also unusual.

Next week, on “Thanksgiving Sunday” we will NOT take up pledge cards; which is what we would ordinarily do at the end of a stewardship campaign. Instead, I will ask you all to come forward and put an item around the altar that represents who YOU are. In my case it could be a prayer book, a cross, a stole, a communion kit, a reminder of my family (or frankly a TV remote control). All of those items represent aspects of who I

am: leader of the liturgy, believer in Christ, priest of the Church, sacramental pastor, husband/father/brother and son, and lazy TV watcher. They're all me. So any of them would be representative of who I am as a child of God, and hopefully a servant of God. I want you to bring in something that is representative of who YOU are. Are you a wife and mother? A coach? An accountant? A laborer? Whatever it is that would constitute an answer to the question, "What do you do?" would be an appropriate item to bring. Give it some thought, because your answer is important.

I've been struggling to get the message across to you for months now that we are ALL called to be disciples of Jesus Christ and servants of the God who created us. Next week is another chapter in that lesson. After you bring all of these items forward, I'm going to bless them all and they will stay at the altar while we celebrate Holy Eucharist together. We will all give thanks for God's giving us the ability to be SOMEONE in God's world. We will give thanks for our lives. We will give thanks for our professions and vocations. We will give thanks for being retired. We will give THANKS. That is the cornerstone of stewardship; a thankful heart.

I have asked you all to maintain your pledges from 2008, or increase them. If you never pledged, this is a great year to start because there's no pressure. Whatever you gave in 2008 will be the amount of our 2009 budget. I'm doing this in absolute faith in you – and in the provision of a loving and generous God. Your Vestry and I are risking it all on your faithfulness.

When Rita hit, you didn't give up on recovery and you didn't give up on St. John's. I know that Ike didn't hit most of us as hard as Rita did, but it brought back memories of Rita and it happened at the same time as a world-wide economic crisis. All of that is very scary and could lure us into complacency, or at least into a sense that any sort of risk would be bad, like the one talent servant. RESIST the urge to be ruled by fear and complacency.

Bring something next Sunday and, rather than being afraid of what's coming, or what's not, let's all get together and be THANKFUL for all that God has given us. And let's risk blessing the coming year, in faith and hope, believing that the God who could bring water out of a rock and turn very little food into a feast for thousands will be with us as we rededicate ourselves to giving – thankfully and gratefully – back to the Master who owns everything we have.

May God bless you – and St. John's – throughout the coming year.

Amen.