

Nov. 13, 2005  
Matthew 25:14-30  
First Parish Church  
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## *Talents for Ministry*

When we were young, my brother Charlie and I handled money in very different ways. I tended to hoard it, and Charlie pretty much spent it as fast as he could. At least, that's the way I remember it.

Through the lens of Charles Dickens, my brother would have called me "Scrooge" and, in fact, I think he did several times. On the other hand, I saw him as Scrooge's profligate nephew, Fred, whom you may remember, even though he has very little, "wastes" his money on parties and presents. In the play *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens fleshes out the message of today's parable through the character Scrooge, who is like the servant who buries his talents for safekeeping.

Now don't put words in my mouth. I'm not bad-mouthing "saving," which is an important financial practice. However, there can be a dark and insidious side to saving that becomes hoarding as we see in Scrooge. And we see in the character Scrooge that his hoarding and money grubbing is not just about money. It is also a metaphor for his whole life. *Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*

Today's parable depicts the dangers of burying our treasures, our talents, our money. This parable is addressed to people who are wondering how to live in the "between" time—between the resurrection and what they expected to be the imminent return of Christ. If Christ is coming again so soon, the early Christians wondered, why should we waste our time on the normal activities of day to day living? Isn't it foolish to invest our "talents" in

earthly life? For most of us today, the dilemma may be more that the problems of the world seem so enormous and sometimes God seems so distant, does investing our talents really make any difference?

In the face of such questions, the parable begins, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them." For the writer of Matthew's gospel, the man who has gone on a journey is Jesus. The crucified and risen Jesus is no longer with his disciples but he has entrusted them with his property – his ministry, a ministry of enormous value, of extravagant worth. The parable uses a monetary metaphor to expand the minds of the listeners, to remind them, and us, of just how incredibly valuable this ministry that Jesus has left us really is.

When I was little and someone in our family would complain that we were "poor," my mother would smile and say, "Oh, no, we're worth at least four million dollars – a million for each of you. Funny, how at the time a million was just an unbelievable amount of money.

In this parable the unit of money is a talent, which was worth more than fifteen **year's** wages for a laborer. It was an incredible amount of money. At the time this story was told, the word talent just meant a unit of money, which is hard for us to realize because talent now means something different to us. The transition of the word happened in the Middle Ages, when monetary talents were no

longer in use. Precisely because of this parable, the meaning of the word talent morphed into meaning “a God-given ability”. Therefore, today as we listen to this parable we experience layers of meaning for the word talent.

The man going on the journey gives his servants five talents, two talents, and one talent, respectively. There is no manual, no detailed job description on exactly what they are to do with the talents they have been given. They must decide for themselves. (We must decide for ourselves.) The first goes off at once and trades his talents, and makes five more. The second did the same and gained two more.

However, the third servant, who had received the one talent, was afraid. He knew it was a risky market these days – that those other two were just lucky. He had heard talk of a recession, and increasing energy costs, so he quickly went to his neighborhood bank and put the talent in a safety deposit box. With a great sigh of relief, he went home, carefully locked the car and the front door behind him, turned on the alarm system, and put the bank key in a special place in the desk drawer. Then he locked the desk. With a great sigh of relief, knowing the talent was safe, he slept well that night.

So far so good. Now, if I say, “A penny saved,” you respond, “a penny earned.” Well, that’s not the message in this parable.

When the master returns he is very pleased with the first two servants and very displeased with the penny-saving, play-it-safe guy. In fact, the master is angry with the third servant for not taking the leap of faith to invest what he had been given.

Did you notice that the third servant said he did what he did out of fear because he believed the master to be harsh? There is a Talmudic teaching that says, “We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are.” The

servant was afraid and so he saw the master as fearsome.

Rachel Naomi Remen, in *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (pg. 77) puts it this way, “a belief is like a pair of sunglasses. When we wear a belief and look at life through it, it is difficult to convince ourselves that what we see is not what is real.”

Today is our consecration Sunday, when in a few moments we will offer our pledges of financial support to the ministries of this congregation for the coming year. We could each be afraid and play-it-safe, wait until the end of the year, see what is left over in our checkbooks and then make a contribution. However, if we see through “left-over” sunglasses, that is what our life together might become- leftovers.

I want to affirm today that our life together is not leftovers. Let me share with you how some of our talents for ministry have been invested this year:

We have a budget of almost \$ 678,000. That’s a lot of money. But think of what we do with that money. I had a church member say to me once, “I’m amazed at what we accomplish on our budget. The company I work for wastes more than that in a year.”

He’s right. It is amazing what churches accomplish with talents –both monetary talents, and ability talents. Not only in what we are able to do directly, but also in the seeds we sow that come to fruit in so many ministries in our families, our schools, our town, and through our denomination.

The largest part of a church budget is always staff. We provide financial support to 11 staff people (five full time, three about half time, and three very part time.) But in the life of the church, staff means ministry. We invest our talents for ministry – for worship services and other programs that we believe enrich not only

our lives but also the life of our whole community. Programs that give witness to the good news of Jesus the Christ.

Several families have joined us in recent years because there is a place here for their young people – a place in church school, in children and youth choirs, in confirmation class, in youth group. In an age of anxiety and consumerism, we need churches where young people learn to invest their talents wisely and faithfully.

We staff not only lead such programs directly, but we also work to support the many, many volunteers who participate in the ministries of our church. Just in confirmation this year, we have 30 adult mentors working with our confirmation students. And there are the many, many volunteers who

- teach in our church school each year,
- who sing and ring in the choirs,
- who help in the church office,
- with church fairs, at bean suppers,
- and those who serve on the various committees, which make possible the multitude of ministries in which we participate.

On the nuts and bolts side of the budget, we are stewards of these buildings, which provide space for ministry - to gather for worship, education, and fellowship. And we share these buildings with others. Just last Sunday there was a worship service, sponsored by Hospice of Mid Coast, held here in our sanctuary. We also provide space for the Boy Scouts, AA, Alanon, OA, Mid Coast Arts School (high school students), Centering Prayer, the Church of the Good Samaritan, and Learning Land (the preschool).

As we can see, the ministries of First Parish church extend out into the wider Brunswick/Topsham/ Midcoast communities. When I was first learning about this congregation, before I came here, I spoke with a woman in the community, who is not a

member of this church, who said to me “First Parish has been at the forefront, and a founding member, of most of the social service ministries in the local community. They have been such a “force for good” in helping us to reach out to our neighbors.” Since coming here I have learned that this includes Mid Coast Hunger, the Tedford Shelter, Oasis Free Clinic, Habitat for Humanity, and the list goes on. People in the wider community are grateful for the ways we have invested our talents-literally and figuratively – to live out the great commandment to love God and love neighbor.

In a world where, when you pick up the morning paper, some days you have to nit pick in order to find any good news, I want you to know that people speak of our ministries here and in the wider community as good news. It is no small thing to bring hope to the world.

Through our sharing of our talents in our denomination, the United Church of Christ, our care of neighbor extends around the world. In this past year of natural disasters – the tsunami last December, Hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Pakistan – I want you to know that as soon as these events happened some relief funds were immediately sent from UCC headquarters. Through our giving to Our Church’s Wider Mission – our denominational benevolence -these funds were immediately available.

Well done, good and faithful servants.

Stewardship is not just about money, but it is about money. Money is one of the ways we contribute our abilities. Where we invest our treasures, we will find our hearts. I invite you to join with me, and my husband Ron, as we make a pledge for the coming year here at First Parish Church– as we invest talents for ministry.

