

*“A Church Renaissance*

*Acts 2.1–13 and Matthew 25.14–28*

*The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, May 15, 2005*

*Pentecost*

**The Parable of the Talents**

*Matthew 25.14–28*

14 “For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; 15 to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. 16 The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. 17 In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. 18 But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. 19 After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 20 Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ 21 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 22 And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ 23 His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ 24 Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; 25 so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 26 But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.      NRSV



I wonder what those disciples were thinking on that Pentecost. There may have been 120 gathered there on that day, as the author writes, “They were all together in one place.” And that was the whole church. *The whole worldwide church: less than one-fourth the size of Plymouth.* So, how do those few fishermen become 120 followers, and 2,000 years later become the largest religious group on the planet with more than a billion adherents? It’s really quite amazing! Pentecost – that day when 120 gathered and received the special presence of the Holy Spirit – is often called “the birthday of the church,” and some churches even have a birthday cake on Pentecost.

One of the things those first Christians might have been thinking is “Okay, Jesus, we’re waiting patiently. When are you coming back?” And if tongues of fire and a violent wind were all they witnessed, they might have felt fairly ripped off. As somebody once said, “We were promised the Kingdom of God, and all we got was the Church!”

Even while Jesus was alive, he spoke about his return. The Parable of the Talents is a very difficult text for most of us, and it occurs in the midst of a multifaceted set of apocalyptic discourses. The main thrust of each component in this section of Matthew’s gospel is to be watchful, stay alert, and be faithful until the end. (I’ve included the text of

this parable in this morning's bulletin, because it is a tough one to follow and to try and figure out.)

The tradition interpretation of the Parable of the Talents is that Jesus is the master who will return. If you, like those earliest church members, were waiting for Jesus' imminent return, the parable would probably make a lot of sense in that context. Jesus goes away, we spread the word about Jesus, he comes back, and rewards those of us who responded faithfully. Or maybe it's not eschatological at all.

Looking back at the text itself, we have the master and three slaves. Two of them are rabid proto-capitalists and one takes the safe route and takes care of what he's got. Two are interested in growth, one is interested in security. *So, what's the big deal?*

Sharon told me a story of Friday about United Church on the Green in New Haven. Like some churches, they gave each of their parishioners \$10 or \$20 to take out and invest in some project and then return the proceeds a month later, reporting back on what they had done. Well, one parishioner decided to take advantage of a the Mohegan tribe's new casino in Connecticut and turned up with 500 bucks. So, there are probably limits to the way one should live out this parable!

Most people would expect the person who preserved the principle from theft or loss (rather than risking blowing it on a potential gain) would be the good guy in this story, since the master never gave instructions about investing the money. Clearly, the master is no prince charming. Rather, he was said to be a harsh man who reaped where he did not sow. (A talent, by the way, is not a small amount of money, but rather was worth more than 15 years of a laborer's wage.) We might feel some sympathy for the third slave. After all, he was afraid of harsh treatment by his master if he lost the principle in the investment, and it would take him 15 years to repay what might have been lost.

We expect that he did an okay thing, but that's not how the parable works out in the end. Jesus ends many of his parables with a twist. And the clincher in this one is that the slave who played it safe is *not* rewarded.

Fear and risk aversion. That's what kept the third slave back: fear and risk aversion. You've heard it said that the opposite of faith is not doubt; it's fear. That doesn't mean that we should go around making stupid decisions because we have *not* cultivated a healthy fear of drinking and driving or playing with rattlesnakes. Nor does it mean that we should go and risk all of our wealth on the blackjack tables in Central City.

But there are times and places when we must feel the fear and do it anyway. And there are times when we need to take a deep breath and risk losing something because our risk may lead to a greater gain. If we aren't willing to do act wisely on faith, and put our fear and risk aversion in the back seat for awhile, we get stuck, we stagnate, we atrophy.

~\*~\*~

Another interpretation of the parable comes from Frederick Buechner. He talks about a traumatic episode in his childhood with an alcoholic father, and someone remarked that he is a "good steward of pain." "A good steward of pain," that's kind of a bizarre turn of phrase. Buechner urges us not to sweep our pain and sadness and hard times under the rug. "I think it is often those times when we were most alive," he says, "when we were somehow closest to being most vitally human beings." It is our own pain and suffering that enables us to be most empathic and compassionate with others who experience the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. Nobody wants to have lousy times, but we all do. And we have to remember them to be good stewards of them.

Buecher says, "It seems to me that the one-talent [play-it-safe] man represents... somebody who buried the richest treasure he had, not just pain, but the most alive part of himself, buried it in the ground. He was never able to become who he might

have been...If you bury your life, you don't live your life. You don't meet other people who are alive. You are alone; you are in the dark...if the life is buried, if the pain is somehow covered over and forgotten, instead of growing, you shrink. You become less; you become diminished."<sup>1</sup>



What if those first Christians, gathered “all in one place,” had decided that the pain of Jesus' crucifixion was just too much to bear? What if they buried their pain and disbanded? Think about the ramifications! Jesus wouldn't even have been a blip on the radar screen of history, and you and I certainly wouldn't be sitting here this morning.

But, they didn't give in to fear. They didn't concede to their own risk aversion, which had led them to scatter and flee Jerusalem after the crucifixion. Instead, they felt their fear and became the church anyway. They risked being ostracized from their synagogues for having a heretical idea that Jesus had been the messiah after all. And so, here we are, because those first Christians refused to succumb to fear and risk-aversion.

If Pentecost is the birthday of the church, then we've got something to celebrate! And at Plymouth, we've been experiencing a rebirth of the church. (The French word for “rebirth,” of course, is renaissance.) We've spent a lot of time in the past couple of years looking at where we should be heading, what risks we should take, and what fears have kept us back. We have a strategic plan to grow this congregation to nearly twice its current size by embracing programmatic changes. We have a master plan to show how we are going to accommodate that growth physically. We're already feeling the pinch in our parking lot, our Sunday School rooms, and on many Sundays in our second service. Sharon and our choir feel it every Sunday morning in the space they have to share!

Plymouth, by the grace of the Spirit, has entered a new era. And that newness and change can result (for some) in fear. What if those first disciples couldn't get their heads around being the church without the physical presence of Jesus? Maybe that's why it took the intervention of the Holy Spirit and a new leader – Paul of Tarsus – who had never met Jesus, to build the church.

Let me retell the Parable of the Talents, and use your imagination to think of ways **you** see Plymouth in the parable.

A master is going on a long trip and entrusts money to three of his slaves, who handle the money in different ways. The master, an abrasive guy, returns to settle accounts. The slaves who turned a profit are promoted, and the slave who played it safe and hid his money underground is taken away and tossed into the darkness.

How do **you** think about our community of faith? Are you somebody who thinks, “The church will always be there?” Are you someone who thinks that we're already doing everything we need to do to reach out to people in Fort Collins who are searching for a progressive Christian community? Are you someone who thinks that a facility that was good enough for Plymouth in 1960 (when we had 200 members) is good enough for now with 500 members? And good enough for the future? Are you somebody who thinks that we already do enough for mission and outreach, and those folks we help should pull themselves up by their bootstraps? Are you someone who doesn't want Plymouth to change, because you like it just the way it is?

What are we called to do with what has been entrusted to us? First, it's important to identify what has been left with us. We have an amazing faith tradition: the United Church of Christ, the Congregational tradition, the church universal, all the way back to the

---

<sup>1</sup> “Stewardship of Pain,” a broadcast sermon by Frederick Buechner, available at [30goodminutes.org](http://30goodminutes.org)

Pentecost experience and to Jesus himself. In our local church, a *Volgadeutsch* legacy and a heritage of hard work and abiding faith that built two church buildings in Fort Collins in less than 60 years. And physically, we have three acres of land with buildings that support our mission and ministry.

*Do we bury these gifts and keep them just as they are? Are we fearful and risk-averse?* This is a key question we need to ask ourselves as we consider a capital campaign.

As individuals, we also need to take account of the gifts that have been entrusted to our care. During the interim period before I was called to Plymouth, members participated in the Hartford Institute survey to tell us about ourselves. (Little did you know you'd be calling a minister who literally worked next door to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research!) This is who the survey said we are (and we've probably become more so in the last three years):

55 percent of us have postgraduate degrees. That's amazingly high! We're a gifted, well-educated congregation, a university church. *How do you use the education that you've been blessed with?*

When asked in that survey how many non-church members you had invited to Plymouth over the last year, most of you said none. That's changing, and it's not that hard to do. If we're all so well educated, we should be able to figure out a way to invite a friend to church and introduce them to Plymouth.

Seven income levels were identified in the survey, and the largest number of you (45%) put your family in the top category, with income over \$75,000 a year. So, there goes the myth that we're a poor church! Our money is a gift that is entrusted to us, and if you take the Psalmist seriously that "The Earth is God's and all that is in it,"<sup>2</sup> the money doesn't ultimately belong to you, but rather it has been entrusted to you. *What you do with it is up to you.*

It's a new era. The average age of members is dropping. In 2002, I was the youngest person on the church council (except for the youth rep). Now we have two council members in the 20s, three in their thirties, and I feel middle-aged!

We've added more than 150 new members in three years; 30 percent of you weren't here three years ago. (And there are still lots of folks who don't know that a progressive church like ours exists.)

We have a significant increase in lay ministry. Literally scores of you have helped with workshop rotation Sunday School, the Calling/Caring Ministry, and the new Health Ministry that Marietta Zimmerman is leading. You're investing your time and your passion!

You're investing your financial resources as well. You are a bunch of really generous people. Our annual budget is more than \$100,000 it was three years ago. That is money that you are investing in the mission and ministry of this church, which spans from Fort Collins to Angola to Banda Aceh. You raised \$12,000 in a matter of weeks to help our conference and denomination in 2003. And you never fail to provide generously in our special offerings. You're not the kind of folks who just bury the cash!

Les Fraley's budget report last month shows that we're sitting on more than \$2 million worth of property. If that is our largest asset, we need to figure out how to use it to its best advantage. How do we leverage what we have to enhance the faith journeys of our members, our future members, and in the wider community?

I'll give you a hint. We're going to have to take a lesson from the early church. **We need to leave fear behind.** We need to focus faithfully on who we are called to become as a congregation of God's people. **We need to be willing to risk the gifts that have been**

---

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 24.1

***entrusted to us:*** whether it's our knowledge, our time, or our assets. And we need to draw deeply from the well of faith to get there.

But our biggest asset **isn't** our property. It's each of you and all of you together. You are the bearers of the Spirit. When you were baptized, the Spirit passed into you in a new way. You were born anew, as new persons in Christ.

So, don't hide your light under a bushel and don't bury your treasure. Go forth in faith not fear, and risk when the Spirit says "risk."

Amen.