

Yr. A, Proper 28
November 15, 2020
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1648 Words

Lessons: Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
Psalm 90:1-12
1st Thessalonians 5:1-11
Matthew 25:14-30

I hate making mistakes. Don't you? I'm not really talking about tiny, little private mistakes, like making a wrong turn on the back roads when you're headed to the beach...although, come to think of it, I even hate that. What could be more frustrating than backtracking for fifteen minutes that your feet could have been nestled into the powdery sand, watching dolphins dance around the shallows at feeding time?

What we really hate are the big, public mistakes, on display for everyone to see—especially your boss...(whew, that can be disastrous.) Or mistakes in front of your friends and family members...(those are hard to live down.) Or the mistakes confided to your priest...(let's hope he or she really believes in that 'grace' concept.) Or this mistakes a priest makes in front of his parishioners...(let's hope I've convinced *you* of that 'grace' concept!)

You know as well as I do *about that one, surefire way* to avoid making a big mistake. We do it all the time by choosing to occupy ourselves with trivial matters. What shade of beige shall we use to paint over last year's taupe? Which curtains shall we hang beside our one precious window looking out into God's glorious creation? To what pabulum shall we pay our attention when we could be giving thanks for goodness and beauty, and interceding for the deep needs of our time?

I'm going to have to preach about money today in order to preach about faith. According to Jesus, those two subjects are inextricably linked. As you know, he preaches about money very often, second only to how often he preaches about God's Kingdom.

So, let's start with me telling you what a talent is. A talent is a crazy, heaping amount of money! We have turned it into a metaphor for our intangible gifts, only because it is so literally clear as a measurement of incredible value.

A talent is fifteen years' worth of a day laborer's wages. It was a huge amount of money that none of those three slaves in Jesus' parable could ever dream of receiving, much less paying back. Using some round numbers in today's dollars, I reckon a talent would be about \$300,000 to \$400,000.

What if you got a check in the mail for \$400,000 from St. Peter's Episcopal Church, along with a little handwritten note that said, "Please use this to glorify God and to love your neighbor as yourself."? That is the first half of today's parable in a nutshell. The second half of today's parable is whatever you would happen to do with a huge gift like that.

Do you know what that kind of money is like in the life of a Church like St. Peter's? It's rocket fuel! Blessed Leonard Turnbull—a quiet, understated, saint of God who lived in a drafty, leaking house and who died a few years ago—he left you and me a talent in his will. In one grand act of generosity, Len became the pacesetter for our endowment, with the largest bequest—I believe—in our congregation's 50-year history. He didn't bury his talent. He invested it! Len chose to invest his talent in *you and me*, and in the mission of Jesus Christ that we are working on right here in our humble little parish!

Now, imagine for a moment what we might do with *two talents* in this place! Well, that's not hard to do either. Two talents are the size of our annual budget. God bless those of you who pledge and give generously to support the ongoing, daily ministries of St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

There is nobody else on earth who cares as much as the 167 of you who are willing to make a simple promise—a pledge—to support our common life and ministry. Nobody, other than the 260 of you who have sent in gifts, really cares one wit about whether there is worship here or not, whether there is someone here to pick up the phone or not, whether there is someone to share our gifts with the poor and hungry or not, whether there is someone to open the doors for a funeral or not.

There are so many good, delicious, shiny, fun, interesting things that I like to spend my money on, but every November Kim and I get to make a promise to blend our power with your power—that’s what money is, you know. It’s power. We get to blend our power with your power, and invest it in becoming a two talent Church for the glory of God and for the blessing of so many people. We get to hold ourselves accountable as philanthropists who choose to invest deeply in the ways and ministries of Jesus Christ.

Well, what about a five talent Church? What does that look like? Well, it looks about like our diocese—with dozens of parishes and missions spread across upper South Carolina—some healthy, some hanging by a thread. It looks like tremendous potential for goodness, performed in Jesus’ name—and actualized in many different locations, and in different ways. A five talent Church values unity, not uniformity. All together, we trust *God’s* goodness enough to take some risks and make some mistakes.

One of the phrases welded onto my vocabulary is an expression I regularly speak instead of saying “good bye” or *in addition to* saying good bye. “Take care,” I like to say to people I love. And I love Bob Vail, a charter member of this parish, an octogenarian, and a disciple of Jesus who walks with him every day—at least *13 miles a day* if I’m not mistaken.

Bob always corrects me (and challenges me) whenever we are saying farewell to one another—either at church or passing one another on the road. “Take care, Bob!” I’ll say.

“No, Father Furman,” he calls back. “*Take a chance!*”

You see, Bob is a five-talent kind of guy. He’s not burying anything in the ground. He’s not afraid of making a mistake. He’s *more interested* in taking a chance. He’s confident enough in the goodness of God not to settle for what is trivial.

Founding members of any church are, by definition, risk-takers. They aren’t asking themselves what shade of beige to paint over the taupe. They are too busy asking, “What is God up to in this neighborhood? What *might we* be able to do with God and one another in this neighborhood?”

The Church desperately needs founding members, every single year of its life, no matter how many years it has been established. We need people asking, “What is God up to *now*? What might we be able to invest in *now*—with God and with each other in this place?”

My friend, Matt Matthews, sent me a copy of a sermon he wrote on this Gospel lesson for this week. He quoted me in his sermon, from a conversation he says we had while drinking coffee one morning many years ago. Although I don’t remember it, he says that I asked him this question: “Matt, has God invested one talent in our churches, or two...or five? Is God skimping on us or has God entrusted more to us than we can imagine?” I love how smart and bold he makes me sound to his congregation in Illinois—smarter and bolder than I know myself to be.

Well, you know what I did this week! I looked back in my digital sermon folders and did a word search. I searched all those documents for the word “skimping.” *Nothing*. I searched all those documents for the words “talent in our churches.” *Zip*. I could not find anywhere that I ever actually posed this question to *you* in a sermon, even if I did articulate it to my pastor friend over a cup of coffee.

So, this is the year I need to ask you the question. I'm just sorry it has taken me this long to ask you. "Has God invested one talent in our Church, or two...or five? Has God invested one enormous talent, deep in *your heart*, or two...or five? What are we burying, for fear of making a mistake? What fruitfulness are we missing out on, over fear of making mistakes?"

"Is God skimping on us with one measly talent—*you know*, fifteen years' worth of wages in one huge gift?! Or has God entrusted more to us than we can ever imagine—like thirty years of wages or seventy-five years' worth of wages...just to see what good we might choose to do with that kind of abundance? What are we willing to invest once we have confidence in the *goodness* of God?"

As I said earlier, this is not only a story about money. It is also a story about faith...about our confidence in the goodness of God. It's a story about choosing how we want to live our lives—choosing whether to be fruitful or fearful. It's a story about choosing the legacy we want to leave behind—choosing whether to spread our blessings around, or bury them in our own backyard.

We need to remember that this story is only scary and disturbing if we think like fearful hoarders. When we learn to trust the goodness of God and think like philanthropists, this parable is about nothing but blessing and abundance, and so I want to conclude this sermon with a blessing for all of us:

May the Lord continue to bless us and keep us with many talents of blessing. May the light of our Lord's countenance shine upon us and be gracious to us. And may *we* have faith and courage *not just* to take care of these blessings and graces, but to take a chance with them...for the glory of God and for the blessing of our neighbors!

Amen.