

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, “It is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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.’ 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ 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? 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. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

**Dancing on Water: Reflecting on Talents**

We have three weeks in Matthew 25. And it’s one heck of a chapter. The end of the Church year is in sight. Advent is just around the corner. Last week, the first parable of Matthew 25 turned up the heat, made things spicy, as Jesus reminded us to keep awake and be prepared for we know neither the day nor the hour when our Savior will appear (25:13). Next week the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Today, Jesus tells us a parable about a man going on a journey who leaves “talents” or large sums of money with his servants. After a long time, the

property owner returns to “settle accounts.” He wants to see what they have done with the gifts that he gave them.

You might recall a recent sermon of mine -- I know you listen to each of my sermons over and over again -- when we talked about “talents.” In fact, we did the math on talents to better understand a parable about forgiveness. We took their financial value in Jesus’ time and multiplied it out to see how much money he was talking about. Well, now talents are showing up yet again. This time, the footnote in my Bible told me something interesting. It turns out this Greek word *talanton* “furnishes the basis for the English word “talent,” as in talent show or a talented musician (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*: see Matthew 24:15 commentary footnote).

We have to pause and wrap our heads around this. Or, better said, we have to “chew” on this one for a while as our Collect of the Day suggests. Could the Holy Spirit be at work here, giving us something to “inwardly digest,” some nutrition for our souls through our Gospel reading? What if we thought about this parable as being one in which Jesus is talking about the gifts we have been given in a bigger and deeper sense? Perhaps this is about how we live our lives, how we share who we are and what we have. It must be about stewardship of our lives. It’s about our ministries, our gifts, the offerings of our hands and hearts, which we get to share for the work of the Kingdom. Even that might sound a bit transactional, though, like an exchange at the heavenly bank teller’s window where we can make deposits or withdrawals. But Jesus was telling us a story to invite us into something deeper, something generous, something prayerful, something truly beautiful and filled with grace. It makes me want to tell you a story, too.

Tim Winton’s novel, *Breath*, is about a couple of surfers before surfing was a thing, growing up in the 1970s in Western Australia.<sup>1</sup> These boys grew up in a mill town on the edge of the wild -- ocean on one side and rugged, rocky forests on the other. It was a town where men were judged by the calluses on their hands, the lumber they produced, the ache of their backs, and the sweat of their brows. These two boys are becoming men in this hardened place. One of the boys reflected on his town this way:

In Sawyer, a town of millers and loggers and dairy farmers, with one butcher and a rep from the rural bank beside the BP, men did sordid, practical things, mostly with their hands. Perhaps a baker might have had a chance to make something as pretty as it was tasty, but our baker was a woman anyway, a person as dour and blunt as any boy’s father and she baked loaves like housebricks.

The novel opens in this context where these boys find themselves hitching a ride out to the forbidden and dangerous ocean at the end of a long dirt road. The boys have never played in the

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Winton, *Breath*.

[https://www.amazon.com/Breath-Novel-Tim-Winton/dp/0312428391/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=tim+winton+breath&qid=1605465596&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Breath-Novel-Tim-Winton/dp/0312428391/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=tim+winton+breath&qid=1605465596&s=books&sr=1-1)

ocean, much less witnessed what they saw that first day at the beach. The hippy surfers grabbed their boards and ran for the sea while these boys, whose fathers had no time for such recklessness, walked out onto the rocky Point to see the swells rippling in against the earth.

They would fall in love with surfing that day and it would become the primary lens through which they experienced adolescence. The adrenaline, the endorphins, the narcotic addiction of big waves. It was all so death-defying and freeing. But for at least one of the boys, there was something deeper he witnessed on that first day. He saw grown men who were supposed to be tough, hard, callused inside and out, offering themselves entirely for “useless beauty.” He and his mate would talk about many things in the years ahead, but never about the beauty of it. He put it this way:

We talked about skill and courage and luck -- we shared all of that, and in time we surfed to fool with death -- but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do.

Jesus tells us a story about talents given and grown. It's about money if we are being historically accurate but somehow the etymological evolution of this word and this story suggests something bigger and deeper, like a surfer who enters into the sacramental water of the sea to make an offering to God, something only a child of Abel could give, that is physical and spiritual, beautiful and useless and impossible to quantify.

The Rite I Eucharist liturgy, to which we will return in Advent, talks about oblations and offerings which flow from God to us and from us to God, a dance between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity. We take wheat and grapes, gifts of the Creator; with our hands we make of them bread and wine, which God receives at the altar and recreates into Christ's Body and Blood given for us, which we receive and digest and are sustained by, that our lives might be given, like Christ's, for all the world. It's quite a dance, really. “Talent” was a word for money and then a word for a gift of skill and now we realize that Jesus is talking about growing and sharing life itself for the good of the Kingdom. We cannot bury what we have been given. We cannot be immobilized by fear of failure. It would be better to risk loss than to keep what we've been given to ourselves.

Which makes me wonder what gifts God has given you that you can give back to God for something graceful and brave and beautiful for the Kingdom? Don't bury your talents in the ground. Share them with us; share them for the work of the Kingdom. What about this beautiful parish we have been given? How might we offer our gifts to bring beauty and grace to a world that is so often ugly and unforgiving? What is it that God is calling us to do next with all that we are and all that we have? How can we reach out beyond ourselves? We have talent to grow and to share.

There is no bad investment in the Kingdom of God, not because the market always gives us visible and quantifiable returns, but because of what we invest: the very gifts of God given to me and you so that we might share in creating something truly beautiful and grace-filled here and now. So we say in that old Rite I Eucharistic prayer that “we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies.” It’s more like dancing than banking. I don’t have much rhythm myself but I’m willing to try. I’d like to try to share what I’ve been given for the work of the Kingdom. “For me there [is] still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water [is] the best and bravest thing a man could do.”