

Entrusted to You
Matthew 25:14-30; I Thessalonians 5:1-11; Psalm 123

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

¹Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ²For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.

⁶So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

¹¹Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said, ¹⁴“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

²⁰Then 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.’

²¹His 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.’

²²And 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.’

²³His 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.’

²⁴Then 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; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

²⁶But 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? ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents.

²⁹For 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. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Psalm

Psalm 123

¹To you I lift up my eyes,

O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

²As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,

as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,

so our eyes look to the LORD our God,

until he has mercy upon us.

³Have mercy upon us, O LORD,

have mercy upon us,

for we have had more than enough of contempt.
⁴Our soul has had more than its fill
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
of the contempt of the proud.

Prayer

O God,
You who are acquainted with all our ways;
You who know completely what we have to say
before we can even articulate it;
You who discern our thoughts from far away:¹

You know how fed up we are with contempt.
From political figures and media pundits,
from weekday co-workers and weekend pulpit pounders,
from TV personalities and Facebook friends,
we've had a belly full of it.

And we know that some among us are praying for the restraint to make it through
Thanksgiving dinner without throwing a spoonful of mashed potatoes across the
table at somebody.

And sometimes, O God,
we hear the sulphurous voice of contempt
coming not from across the airwaves or the table,
but from our own troubled hearts and disquieted minds.

And you also know, O God, better than we,
that it is not we who are spoken for in this faithful psalm.

Most of us here in this room today
are not the ones
for whom being regarded and treated with contempt
is lethal.

When the psalmist prays as a soul who has had more than its fill
of the scorn of those who are at ease,
and the contempt of the proud,
we know that *we* are the ones who are, comparatively speaking,

at ease.

We are the ones who are, much more than we intend,
the proud.

And it is our contempt—

contempt from a position of relative power, ease, and influence—
that we must here confess.

We pour contempt on those with less than us—

less privilege, lesser means,
less power in the economic, political and social ecosystems
in which we live.

We sputter and rage against the phenomenon of political correctness

in part because it touches a defensive nerve within us,
and perhaps because somewhere deep within,
it threatens to invert a power structure
in which we people of historical pride and relative ease
have been raised to be quite comfortable,
thank you very much—

satisfied with meaningful but limited giving of our resources,
satisfied with speaking up enough to be publicly recognized
as being dedicated to worthy causes,
without causing too much disruption of our ability
to cling to power
and to maintain the position
of being able to decide for ourselves
how much contempt it is appropriate for us
to pour on those who are not as privileged.

Please help us, O God.

We have had more than enough of contempt,
especially that which surprises us from within,
and pours forth toxically

on those with less,
and on those with more,
and on those for whom we reserve our bitterest scorn of all
in the mirror of judgement. Amen.

The Sermon

What has God entrusted to you?

When the day comes when you and God will stand in the end zone looking back over the football field of the life you have lived, what do you hope to see? What decisions that you made, and routes that you chose, will God and you most enjoy recounting together?

Where are the places, and what are the times you will observe, when God will say, “I entrusted you with something here—some gift you were given; some privilege you enjoyed; some advantage that not everybody has; some circumstance of where and when and to whom you were born”?

“And you took that gift, that privilege, those special, particular circumstances—and in what you did with them, the way you invested them in the world, you doubled the positive impact of what I entrusted you with.

“Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

In the parable Jesus told, there’s a lord of the manor who sets out on a long journey, and for the time that he’ll be away, he entrusts the stewardship of a seriously major fortune to three of his “slaves”—not, it needs to be clarified, captives of a dehumanizing, animalizing system, as in American slavery or international sex-trade slavery; but nevertheless, they are legally bound, duty-bound, indentured servants.

Matthew is the only one among the evangelists, or anybody else in the Bible, who uses the Greek word *tálanon*, which is transliterated as *talent*, but not the way we use the word “talent.”ⁱⁱ

A talent was not at this time a specific coin, either, but a weight—somewhere around 75 pounds. 75 pounds of silver was worth about 6,000 denarii, which is to say, about 20 years’ salary for an average worker.ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s assuming Jesus was referring to a talent of silver; if he was implying talents of gold, one talent would be the total pay over a 20-year period for *thirty* workers.^{iv}

There's an episode in John's gospel where Judas sees Martha's sister Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, and in cynicism disguised as pseudo-concern, he says, "How come that perfume isn't sold for three hundred denarii, and we give the money to the poor?"^v

So, doing the math, imagine an amount that's *that* significant—300 denarii, *one* year's wages for a worker—

enough to be regarded as extravagant for religious purposes,
enough to make a significant impact
on the local food pantry,
or homeless shelter,
or after-school program.

The one talent that was entrusted to the servant regarded as the weakest of the three is worth twenty times the amount that Judas noted could have made a profound difference to a local ministry for the poor.

Even the servant in whom the lord of the manor had the *least* amount of confidence was given charge over a massive treasure, something deeply valuable, enough of a fortune to care for and positively impact the lives of countless numbers of the people who needed it most.

But that servant was afraid of the wrath of the lord of the manor, in case any of the treasure that he'd been entrusted with was risked and lost.

So he did what he thought was the safest thing with the treasure that the lord had given to him to steward. Rather than any of it being lost, or wasted, or taken by somebody who didn't deserve it, he buried it in the ground.

Jesus doesn't say what motivated the other two, but that servant acted out of fear.

What happens when people who mean to be faithful make decisions based on fear rather than on hope and trust and love? What happens when communities, including congregations, don't believe they have the freedom to fail, and so are afraid to risk something not going entirely right, as if they and not Christ were the source of the Church's life?

When it was time for that fearful servant to give an accounting, he said to his lord, "I give you back what is yours."

When the time comes when you and God will stand in the end zone looking back over the football field of your life, what do you hope to see? What decisions that you made, and routes that you chose, will God and you most enjoy looking back on?

The other two servants did not bury what they'd been entrusted with. The New Revised Standard Version follows the King James Version in saying they "traded with" the talents that had been placed in their care, and made more of them; but the Greek doesn't have a word as specific as "traded."

The word that's been translated "traded" just means to work, to perform, to do something; to practice, to commit, to acquire something by working for it. It's the same word that shows up in a play on words that John uses a couple of times.

In John's gospel, the crowds who have just been fed on the miracle of the loaves and fishes come to Jesus and ask him, "What do we need to do to *work the works* of God?"^{vi}—*erga-zōmetha ta erga*, "work the works."

And Jesus tells them, according to John, "The work of God is to believe in the one whom God has sent."

Which is when they notoriously said—
having just been fed, as 5,000 households,
on five loaves and two fish—
"Thank you for doing that;
now, could you give us some kind of *sign*..."

"What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?"

"What *work* are *you* performing?"

That's the same word Matthew says Jesus used in saying what the two "faithful servants" did with the fortunes they'd been entrusted with.

Whatever it was, they *worked* with it; they did something; they made something out of it; they put something into practice, they committed something to their stewardship of what had been given to them.

They found a way to take the treasure that their lord had placed in their hands, and they worked some works.

I find it an arresting notion to consider that a human being has the God-given capacity to give back to God more than God invested in you. It's a liberating and authorizing charge.

You know what you are made of, and you know what is good, O mortal; so now let's see what amazing things you will do.

Jesus unfolded this image for those who have been called to follow him and want to do it as well as possible.

When he and I are standing on the farther shore and looking back over the distance that I have come, I don't want the voyage to have been an inconsequential life of "moralistic therapeutic deism,"^{vii} where the highest goal that I can point to is just to have tried to do no harm, feel good about myself, and vaguely believe in something like God.

What extraordinary treasure has God placed in your hands?

I think of this specifically this week, because next Sunday is, in the liturgical calendar, Christ the King Sunday, which begins the final, culminating week of the liturgical year. After that, a whole new liturgical year begins with the First Sunday of Advent.

So another year of faithful worship, stewardship, and ministry in Christ's name will be coming to its conclusion very soon, and maybe it's a good time for each of us to consider what works we've worked in the past year under his lordship, and what kind of servants we want to be in the year ahead.

What great gifts has God entrusted you with—so great they could make a difference in a local homeless shelter, or food ministry, or any other service to people in need, or any other expression of faithful worship of Jesus Christ?

And what works are you and I capable of—individually and together—that would invest what God has entrusted to us in the welfare of the world?

We do have considerable gifts, considerable talents;

and each of us has, and all of us have, works to work, in whatever way we've been gifted:

the gift of showing compassion,
the gift of moderating peaceful solutions,
the gift of financially underwriting ministries for the poor,
the gift of keeping company,
the gift of keeping books,
the gift of being able to knit a cap for a baby in a developing country,
the gift of bringing people together,
the gift of holding the world in prayer,
the gift of carrying a tune,
the gift of understanding nuclear physics or human biology,
the gift of being connected to people of enormous power and influence,
the gift of making a casserole when that is exactly what somebody needs.

Let us work those works. Let us invest those talents.

Because there is a world out there of people who are at their wits' end and are just begging God, or the universe, or you, or me, for mercy.

“For they have had more than enough of contempt.”

*To you I lift up my eyes,
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,
so our eyes look to the LORD our God,
until he has mercy upon us.*

Until God has mercy on us all.

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ⁱ Psalm 139:2-4

ⁱⁱ For information on the word “talent” in this context, I rely on the scholarship found at the ordinarily reliable <http://biblehub.com/greek/5007.htm>, backed up by other commentaries. Also, from Hammond & Busch’s *The English Bible Norton Critical Edition*: the common meaning of the word “talent” in fact derives from the misunderstanding of this passage, wherein it was believed that the slaves had used (or hidden away) their natural abilities! See n. Matthew 25:14ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 20:2: Though the NRSV omits the word, the Greek states the word “denarius” as the daily wage the workers are offered in the morning.

^{iv} ["A *talent* refers to a talent-*weight* of silver (the weight and the value being different in different countries and at different times). A common value of a talent was 6000 *denarii*" (Souter).] <http://biblehub.com/greek/5007.htm>.

^v John 12:1-5

^{vi} John 6:28

^{vii} See Kenda C. Dean, *Almost Christian* (Oxford University Press, 2010).