

Hinde Street Methodist Church

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“Keep the faith? No, spread it!”: Talents, fear, and the courage to be generous

Matthew 25: 14-30

In his victory speech last weekend, President-Elect Joe Biden concluded by saying this: ‘My Grandpa used to say when I was growing up in Scranton: ‘Joey, keep the faith!’ But my Grandma would say, ‘No, spread it!’” Keep the faith? No, spread it!

In a way, Jesus said something similar to the Biden grandparents in this parable which we have heard today from Matthew’s account of the Gospel. Don’t just keep the faith, spread it! Well what does that mean in the context of the Parable of the Talents? That’s what I’d like us to briefly explore this morning.

The Parable of the Talents is a rich resource for the preacher. A traditional view of this parable centres around that word ‘talent’—a term for a unit of weight, valued for the weight of silver—and the helpful alternative definition of “talent” in English translation, linked to aptitude, skill, or gift. And so it lends itself to a solid address about what talents we all have been uniquely given and how we can use them to do good. But what if the Parable of the Talent isn’t really about the word ‘talent’ after all? What if it is about something else entirely?

A hint at an alternative interpretation lies in where the parable is situated in the chronology of Matthew’s account of the Gospel. The Parable of the Talents is the penultimate parable of Jesus in Matthew’s narrative. Here it lies between the Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, two stories about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven. Taken together, the three parables form the climax of Jesus’ teaching on the Mount of Olives when he is asked by the Disciples: ‘what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ And following these three parables we read the account of Jesus’ arrest, trial, and crucifixion. The parables about the end times precede the end times themselves.

So, the parable appears in a climactic moment of the Gospel. It is less about the use of talent, and far more about how we as disciples face the apparent end times and stay true to our calling and keep—or, indeed, spread—the faith at that hour.

The German pastor Martin Neimoller faced the end times. We remember Neimoller today for his famous poem which begins: ‘First they came for the Jews but I did not speak out...’ and ends ‘Finally, they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me.’ In 1937 Neimoller was imprisoned for his opposition to the Nazis and spent the next eight years in concentration camps before being liberated from Dachau by US forces in April 1945. Neimoller was rare amongst German church leaders in that decades after the fall of Nazism and the end of the Holocaust he did eventually acknowledge that he had not done enough to stand up for his Jewish neighbours. But he was still an opponent of the Nazi regime and for this he suffered in the camps for many years. I read recently that soon after the war Neimoller returned to Dachau with his wife. He described how they saw for the first time the plaque commemorating the inmates murdered by the Nazis in Dachau between 1933 and 1945. His wife, he explained, nearly collapsed as she read the figure. But what made Neimoller shudder, he later said, was not the number of dead—that he already knew—but the dates: 1933-1945. ‘My alibi,’ he said, ‘accounted for the years 1937-1945. But God was not asking me where I had been from 1937 to 1945, but from 1933 to 1945, and for those first four years I had no answer.’

Where is your alibi? God asked Martin Neimoller. Where are the talents I invested in you? the master asked the slaves.

Where are you? God asked Adam and Eve. What is that in your hand? God asked Moses. Can these bones live? God asked Ezekiel. Do you have eyes and still not see? Asked Jesus. Throughout the Bible, it is often the questions which God asks of us which cause us to really stop and think.

And what question is God asking of us today? Well, a master and three servants are the major characters in the story of the Parable of the Talents and there are three different responses to the master's investment of the talents. The first two are similar: they take the talents they are given and they multiply them so that when the master returns they are able to point to the difference they have made using that which he entrusted with them. But the third servant's response is different and so it is upon this exchange that the parable rests. The third servant does not act recklessly with his talent—he does not spend it or gamble it or waste it (he is not a Prodigal Son type figure)—but he puts it away out of—as he later admits—his *fear* of the master whose potential for retribution he is aware of. And it is this fear which is the servant's undoing: as Martin Neimoller tried to save the Church in those early years of Nazism only years later to realise his own passivity in the face of the persecution of the Church's neighbour, so by acting out of fear, fears are in fact realised.

In this way, the Parable of the Talents is not about talent at all: it is about courage. Faced with the crucifixion, Jesus asks the Disciples if they have the courage to face the cataclysm of what is to come, are they prepared for the challenges which discipleship truly asks of them, and so we too are asked in turn, at the end of a church year and in all we face today and in the days to come: do we have courage to hold on to our faith?

It is an understatement to say that this has been a difficult year as we look back on it now as we approach Advent, and to think of all that we have been through so far, and all there is of the unknown to come. And yet, and yet, life does go on: the rhythm of the seasons and the pattern of the church year. It is remarkable to think that those lists of names whom we commemorated last week on Remembrance Sunday on countless memorial boards across these islands from city centre Methodist church to storm battered faraway chapels, to think those names were known and loved and treasured by people left behind by war who knew something of the uncertainty, unpredictability, and, yes, *fear* of a pandemic not wholly unlike the one we are going through now. Time and the decades roll on in an ever ending sea of chance and faith. And, still, that faith connects us across generations, across continents, and across computer screens and phone lines, and it is this faith which is the basis of the courage necessary to face the fear of the challenges ahead. But how?

My favourite living novelist, Marilynne Robinson writes this, and I apologise if you've heard me use these words before, but I think that in the end this is what it's all about. I quote: 'Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honour them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing.'

Jesus asks us if we have the courage to hold on to our faith in the face of unimaginable challenge. Perhaps one way to answer him is to be useful, to be generous. Courage is prayer. Courage is a telephone call. Courage is a letter, a wave across the street, a Tupperware box of homemade supplies left on the doorstep of a neighbour. All of these things, which are courageous and useful

and generous, all of these things I believe, can change the world because they change the world for the one who, knowingly or unknowingly, asked us for help.

We are called to find within ourselves the courage necessary to face up to our understandable fear: to acknowledge the truth of our context, to challenge wrong, and to live in love. We may not always succeed, but God gives us the opportunity to attempt an answer to His question—as the master distributed the talents. It is for us to go, and do likewise: to sow and to reap, to not just keep the faith safe through the challenging times, but to spread it through generosity too.

For as Scripture says, and as one other former Presidential candidate once quoted, ‘Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.’

So thanks be to God.

Amen.