

Parable of the Talents
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Church - Toano, VA
27th Sunday after Pentecost – November 16, 2008
Matthew 25:14-30, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

A few years after my grandfather died, it was time for my grandmother to move out of her house and into a retirement home. My mom went down to Florida to sort through her belongings and help her move. While she was cleaning out the garage she found some china hidden away. (Show piece of china.) So she asked my grandmother about the china and my grandmother said, “Oh, that’s the Civil War china.”

My mom didn’t understand.

“That’s the china that our family buried in the backyard in Virginia during the Civil War so that it wouldn’t be stolen.”

There was a whole set of china there that we had never seen or used. China that had been buried in the ground to protect it.

When I read the parable of the talents this week, I remembered this hidden china, and it led me to think about why we bury things.

What things do we bury? What comes to mind first is funerals. We bury people who have died. “You are dust and to dust you shall return,” we say. Burying the dead is a proper use of burial.

So what other things do we bury? Well, I think of the stories of buried treasure. Why would someone bury their treasure or their china? I heard a story this week about a contractor who was working on a house in Cleveland and found \$182,000 stashed away in one of the walls. Why would someone keep that much money hidden in the walls? Why not invest it, just like the first two slaves did in the parable? Why not let it make more money? Why bury the treasure? Why bury the china? To protect it. To keep it safe. To make sure it won't be taken away.

Why? Because we're afraid. We're afraid to take risks with what we have for fear of losing it. We're afraid if people know about what we have, they will take it away. Now in terms of my grandmother's china, burying it did protect it, and though it remained hidden in a garage for a long time, now that my mother has discovered it, a whole new generation is able to enjoy it and make use of it. But what happens when we bury things permanently?

If you think about the parable of the talents as just being about money, then it doesn't seem to be a parable at all. It just seems to be a common sense story. The master gives his slaves some money to take care of for him and then he goes away for a really long time. It just makes sense to find some way to invest it and make more money for the master. Fortunately none of his slaves were dishonest, so none of them took the money for themselves, but clearly the man who buried the money in the ground wasn't using his head. You invest money, you make it grow. (Okay, that may be difficult in the current economic climate, but you know what I mean.)

No wonder the master was angry with the slave when he returned. No wonder he took away the buried talent and gave it to the slave who really knew how to make the money grow. If you think of the talents as money, then this story is about good business sense.

But Jesus wasn't a businessman, and I doubt his intention in telling this story was to give investment advice. So what else is Jesus getting at?

The man who buried his talent in the ground was afraid. We know that the talent in Jesus' time was money. In fact it was an enormous amount of money. But what if the talents in the story are talents in the way we use the word today, in the sense of a natural ability to do something well. If the master in the story is Jesus and he gives us gifts, then what business do we have burying them in the ground? Here we are, recipients of God' generosity, and instead of using the gifts we've been given, we hide them away, afraid of what might happen if we risk using them.

Last week we had a spiritual gifts workshop in which we discussed the gifts that God has given us and how we can make use of them. One of the things that Michael discussed with us was what impediments keep us from using our gifts. He used the phrase "lust for security" to describe that craving we have to be safe, not just in a financial sense, but in the sense of playing it safe. Are we afraid that our gifts are not enough? Are we afraid that our gifts will be taken away? Are we afraid that in using our gifts we might offend someone or cause trouble or disrupt the status quo? It's important for us to examine our fears and how they cause us to bury our gifts in the ground.

It's not only important for us to look at our individual gifts but to look at the gifts God has bestowed on Hickory Neck Church. We are only two weeks from Advent, the beginning of our church year. The end of the year is a good time for reflection. As we hold our Annual Meeting today and hear about how we've used our gifts in the past year, it's also important to look at what gifts we might have buried in the ground. God has given us the gifts of warmth and hospitality, the gift of a healthy, growing congregation, the gifts of music and laughter, the gift of working together to achieve a common goal. God has given us the gifts of many generations who worship side by side. God has given us the gift of love.

What will we do with all these gifts? We've been given so much. Will we give in to fear, to our lust for security, and bury our gifts in the ground? Or will we be that beacon on the hill shining forth, even when we're scared that we might lose it all? Will we proclaim the kingdom of God, or will we try to keep it hidden here within these walls? I mentioned earlier that burying the dead is a proper use of burial. But what happens when we bury things that are alive? They die too.

We are alive, and our gifts are alive. Paul says to the Thessalonians, "You are not in darkness for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do." We are awake and alive, people of God at Hickory Neck Church. We are children of light. We are Christians who follow Christ. Unfortunately, if we were looking for safety and security, we've made a poor choice. If Jesus had played it safe, if he had buried his talent in the ground, and he could easily have done so by simply never going to Jerusalem, then where would we be today? Jesus risked it all, made the greatest investment of all, by giving up his life. Are we ready to follow?