

“Faithful Slave”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 27 (A) – 13 November 2011  
Matthew 25:14-30

Your heart has to go out to the slave who was given the one talent. He must have felt less trusted and insignificant compared to his colleagues who got two and five talents, and he was probably scared. A talent of gold weighed seventy-five pounds. That’s a lot of gold, a lot of responsibility.

That one-talent slave didn’t think too highly of his master either. To reap where you did not scatter seed is a pastoral way of saying, “My boss is a thief.” To the one-talent slave, his master was a scary guy: cunning, ruthless, without scruple. Left with such immense responsibility, the slave buried the gold in the ground. Better that than take a risk and lose with such a tough boss.

Of course, the master in Jesus’ parable is God, and while it may be hard for many of us to understand the one-talent slaves’ attitude toward his master, some of us can sympathize. You may feel that God has taken something from you, like someone you love, or that God has withheld something from you, like a fair chance at a happy life or an opportunity that you treasured but never had. This is perfectly understandable. It’s tempting, when life goes wrong, to blame God, because we rightly believe that God is in charge, so when life goes wrong, it must be God’s fault. However, this attitude ignores God’s greatest gift to us, finer than pure gold.

We are free, free to make choices, free to take chances. And this freedom is beautifully displayed by the other two slaves, entrusted with two and five talents. This pair usually gets ignored. The focus is on the cautious slave who buried the gold in the ground. But the parable is actually more about them than the one-talent slave.

Just as he did, they likely feared the boss. Any man with that much money was a formidable figure. All total, he distributed 600 pounds of gold to his three servants. At current market prices that is nearly \$15 million, not a lot in a world of multi-billion dollar deals and multi-million dollar bonuses, but back then, two thousand years ago, it was a kingly treasure. In my life, I've only met a handful of people worth that much money, and kind as though most of them were, they intimidated me at first.

The two-talent and five-talent slave also must have been tense over the enormous responsibility laid on their shoulders. The temptation to bury that gold somewhere safe had to be almost overwhelming. Managing that amount of money took a lot of attention, and risk was rife. Deals could go wrong. Highly motivated, scarcely moral people were no doubt eager to take advantage. Yet somehow, those two slaves, entrusted with the most, found a way to overcome their qualms.

There's no indication of how long the master was gone, but by the time he returned, Mr. Five-Talent and Mr. Two-Talent had doubled up to Mr. Ten-Talent and Mr. Four-Talent. The master was delighted. His trust in them had paid off handsomely.

What this parable tells us about God is that when people are given a mission, and they carry it out with courage, God gets excited. That's something for us to think about it. Forget about the gold for a minute, and remember that a parable is a metaphorical story and just about everything in it is an allegory. We know that the master is God. We know that the slaves are us. But what's the gold? The gold is the spiritual gift of faith.

Our mission, whether we have been endowed with a little or a lot, is to multiply that precious gift of faith. It is a scary prospect, and we shudder to think what failure might look like. But just as the master in the parable must have had immense confidence in his slaves, a

confidence that was born out bountifully with the two who took risks, so God has tremendous belief in us. As I once teased my atheist friends in college, “You may not believe in God, but God believes in you.”

And that’s the message I hope you take away from this parable. God may feel scary to you. The idea of taking a risk with your faith in order to magnify it may make you nervous. But God believes in you, and if God believes in you, then you have every reason to believe in you, too.

Now there may be some here who feel that God has not given them the gift of faith and that, therefore, God does not believe in you. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are many things that prevent us from receiving the gift of faith: pride, the idea that we have all the answers and don’t need any help; fear, the feeling that accepting grace will take us places where we will be hurt more than we will be helped; a sense of unworthiness that whispers into your inner ear that you are not good enough for God and for gifts like faith. Pride, fear, and feeling unworthy are formidable obstacles to receiving faith.

Yet they can be overcome. The proud can become humble. The frightened can take courage. Those who feel unworthy can awaken to the reality that they are beloved children of God. All it takes is focus. Focus on the truth that there is one element of the parable which is not a metaphor, not an allegory.

God is the master. We are the slaves. Now that characterization may chafe a bit, because we love our freedom and do not wish to admit that we are slaves to anyone, but the truth isn’t always comfy at first. We have to settle into it, and when we do, we can realize that the most liberated person on Earth who denies that God is their Master and that they are God’s slave, that supposedly free person is the most imprisoned and limited of all.

To the proud, admitting that God literally owns you will renew perspective, leading to an appropriate humbleness. To the frightened, the idea of being owned brings a sense of belonging to someone who will watch over you. And to those who feel unworthy, well, when you're a slave, your worth is determined by your master. And our master, God, loves you and thinks you're wonderful. In fact, God loves you so much that he wants to entrust you with a gift of grace money cannot buy.

Accept that gift, and the responsibility that goes with it. Receive faith and believe that God believes in you. Know that the risk may seem terrible. However, accepting faith and using it and multiplying it open wonderful, incalculable possibilities.

But what is this faith of which we speak? We know of gold and its value, how to buy and sell it, how it rises and declines in price, but how do we use and multiply faith? Faith is simply this: the relationship we share with Jesus Christ. To use faith is to nurture and cultivate that relationship, to give it attention, to value that relationship as precious. And when we use faith, it naturally grows, like using a muscle makes it bigger and stronger.

And as faith doubles in you, it can begin doubling in others. Others will see something desirably different in you, and they will think, "I want that." The spiritual wealth of God – worth more than the passing things of this world – will start to spread, reaching every heart until the truth about the master is known to all.

He does not reap where he does not scatter seed, because God owns everything, including us. He is not scary, except perhaps in the ferocity of his love. And when people understand that, the precious treasure of all won't get buried in the ground. It will get used. It will grow. And God will be pleased and excited. Amen.