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Matthew 25:14-30
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When Jesus tells a story like this, we just don't know what to do. Do we love him and follow him or do we throw up our hands in exasperation? He talks about these wicked servants and weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth; we worry he might be talking about us. We hope it's somebody else he has in mind. It's a great story. Jesus says there was a man who went on a journey and he entrusted his property to someone. I'm familiar with this. My neighbor goes on a journey; I take care of his property; I get his mail; I get his newspaper; I water his plants. But that's not what Jesus says. Jesus says he entrusted to one five talents and to one two talents and to one just one talent. And we like this story because we think it is a talent as in a little ability that I might happen to have, and we like that. God gave me some little ability and I will use it for God, and God will be pleased and say *Well done good and faithful servant*. The problem with this is that when Jesus articulates this parable, he doesn't use the word "talent" as in a little ability that you have.

The original Greek has vowels in there. What Jesus says is the owner gives a talanta and a talanta is an amount of money and it is a ridiculously large amount of money. One talanta would have weighed 70 pounds and it would have been made of solid gold. Oh my goodness, we're talking about 10 CEO Mega bonuses. It's as if you've been handed a deed to Fort Knox; it's as if you've won the lottery 10 times. It is an unspeakably large amount of money.

Josephus, the first-century historian, calculated that in the time of Jesus there were about – this is interesting – total money and circulation in the entire Mediterranean World would have been about 500 talents. That means one of the guys in the story got one percent of all the money in circulation. This would put Bill Gates in the shade – huge amounts of money – five talents – are you getting this? And Jesus is telling this to people who are totally impoverished. They don't have one shackle in their pocket. They have never invested any money anywhere because they live on the streets and they are surviving, barely making it, and Jesus talks about investing five talents, a mind-boggling huge amount of money. Of course, we can see from this that Jesus is being logarithmically ridiculous. Jesus is not talking about investment policy.

Jesus is not talking about little talents that we have. What Jesus is talking about is what really has value and that is the gospel – the gospel – the fact that God created the universe – the fact of God giving you life – your heart beating now within your chest – all the love in your world and in your life – the possibility of hope – the possibility of eternal life – meaning, purpose – all of that. The problem that we have that I think that emerges from this story is that we don't value the gospel all that highly, do we?

I preached a sermon two weeks ago – this is very interesting, by the way – I came over that morning, if you were here. I had written a sermon and I thought "This shall be my last sermon ever at Meyers Park" because it had all this stuff in it, and I thought I'd be fired by the end of the day, in all honesty. In that sermon I vented over two

subjects – I had just had a birthday – I was crotchety – I was in a really bad mood – I had all this stuff I had been carrying around inside me – so it just came out. And I vented and it's interesting – people didn't say "You're fired" – people said "That was great, do it again, do it again." And I'm about to do it again. I'm going to vent again. The previous vent two weeks ago, it was two-fold. The first vent everybody really liked a lot – the first vent was that I went off on how tired I am of people trashing organized religion. I'm just so fed up with that. It's so easy – it's so chic – it's so hip and cool – and I just get so tired of it. I went off on this and everybody in the room loved it – not surprisingly – you're organized religion people – that's why you're here. My second vent I think people weren't that fond of. My second vent was this: I said what is just the cold honest truth, which is that I find it to be embarrassing to be a minister at this time of year. I'm usually very proud but at this time of year I'm embarrassed to be a minister because this is the time of year that we beg, we plead, we cajole, we nag, we send mail, we send more mail, we send e-mail and we're saying "P l e a s e give us some money, p l e a s e." And it's just blank responses, and it's just so embarrassing that we even have to do this at all. What we're asking you to do is to give something to God who has given you everything, and then the real humiliation comes when during the course of the year we know that Jesus is calling us to do something powerful and significant and we have to say "We don't have the money." We've got the money – we're just not getting it. So that was my vent and I don't think people liked that vent quite as well.

My vent today, actually, is at the heart of both of those vents, and it is this – the gospel is worth all these talents that Jesus talks about, but what you and I do is we minimize it.

We shrink it down to size. Instead of thinking of God as huge and enormous in every breath that we take and the greatest wonder in the world, what we do is we shrink it down to a back-pocket Genie kind of God. We've got God in our back pocket and we think "When I need God I'll pull God out." "I'm going in for knee surgery and I hope that goes well. I'll pull it out and ask God for a prayer and get God's help" or "I'm kind of at a tough patch of life. I'll pull my little God Genie out." We want God to be something nice, something small, something manageable. I wrote in my notes – I shouldn't have done this – I said "We have a Red Bull God." I don't really know what Red Bull is – I meant to look that up during the week. I think it's like an energy drink or something, right? And I could say "No I'm not an energy drink kind of guy." But that actually would not be true. I actually believe in imbibing things that give you a little boost. For instance, caffeine – I'm a big believer in caffeine. If I had not had caffeine this morning you would see fulfilled before your eyes that old joke about the minister who dreamed that he was preaching and when he woke up, he was. So, I believe in the power of the caffeine. And so, it's like we have a caffeine Red Bull God. God will give you a little boost. I don't quite have enough.

Sometimes people come to me and their marriage is a mess and they say "Can God fix it?" And I'll say "God can fix it," but what they tend to want is they had a marriage where they thought once in a blue moon about God. They weren't against God – God was in their back pocket. And then their marriage got to be a mess and what they want is to get God to fix it so they can go back to that old life where God is still hidden in the back pocket. Or sometimes people come to me and they discover that their life is a

mess or that it's hollow – they've achieved all this – it's great – it's wonderful and they've got it all – and they are the envy of their neighbors. But they say "It's not good; it's not enough; it's nothing. And here I am, can God fix this?" They want to go to some life where, when again, God is in the back pocket instead of God being everything – God being our consuming passion.

That's our problem. We shrink God down to size. People worry about the shrinkage in the church. If the numbers of the church are shrinking, it's because we have shrunk our idea of God, If God's really small and just some little nice add-on, I mean, why come to church really if that's all it's about? Maybe part of the problem is that when we hear a passage like the one that was read to us, we like the idea that there might be talents with an E as in my little abilities that I have to offer to God – we like that; we feel good about ourselves. I have talents and I give to God. You notice that there's some kind of self-flattery in that? It kind of keeps us at the center of the universe.

There are two words that have crept into church life. We use them a lot – we should not use them. George, Bill, we're going to abolish the use of these two words in church life. We use them all the time – we've got to stop. The two words are “volunteer” and “donor.” We use these all the time. We say "Volunteer." I think you like to be asked to volunteer because if I call you a volunteer that means that you are someone who is the master of your time and abilities. You may choose to volunteer some of your time and your ability. Do you see the self-flattery in that? Or we call you a donor, and we like to be called donors because

that means "My money is mine and I might give some of it and then I feel cool about myself."

I was at a fund-raiser last night – this is fascinating – I put on my tuxedo and I went to the Ritz Carlton – you can imagine the kind of fund-raiser that this was. And I went there – fund-raisers like this are great, by the way – we raised a lot of money for a good cause – it was a whole lot of fun. But as I looked around the room, we had a roomful of donors, invited donors, people that they predicted could come and be good donors. There's all this flattery in this. I actually spent time sitting next to the person that I would guess was the wealthiest person in the room, and it was amazing. As we were talking, people would come by and they would say, "Oh, hi, oh, thank you for coming, oh." I felt just so cool, like proximity, it was great. "Oh, thank you." And it is good that this donor came. It is good when we raise money for such things. But do you see the flattery? And it occurred to me as people were coming over and fawning over this donor, that if Jesus, the guy who thought up the story of the talents, the guy who actually is the owner of all the money in circulation, if Jesus had come to this fund-raiser last night, somebody would have said "Do you have a ticket? How'd you get here? What are you doing here?" Nobody would have come by and said "Oh, Jesus, thank you for coming." Because Jesus tended to go to events and would tell stories and would just get on everybody's nerve and kind of expose the hypocrisy. Do you see the flattery in it for being a donor? What's interesting is that God is not about flattering us. What God wants is to humble us.

When God gives us the gift of the gospel it's not so that we shall feel flattered and very good about ourselves. No,

when God gives us the gospel the only possible appropriate response would be humility, humble, awe and wonder over what God has done. What got the guy with the one talent is, he says, "I was afraid." It's always fear that does us in. We are told all the time in our society to be afraid. Be very afraid. If you think about going and doing some good for someone, think twice because you should be afraid. If you're thinking about parting with a good chunk of money, think twice about that. You should be very afraid.

We're told all the time, "Fear trumps in over everything," but you know that the No. 1 commandment in the Bible is in terms of frequency? It is *Be not afraid*. God over and over says to us, pleads with us, *Be not afraid*. You don't have to be afraid because God is the God who owns all the talents. God is the God with the gospel that is so extraordinary it can never be undone. Whatever unfolds in history we need not be afraid.

The one talent guy also blew it when he says "Well, master, I thought you were a hard man." Sometimes we think that God is a hard God but God is not a hard God, God is a tender God. God is a vulnerable God. God is a compassionate God. When God decided to show himself to us, to show us what all the wealth behind the universe is about, he did not come down as a mighty rich person. He did not come down as general, commanding huge armies. Instead, he came down as an infant.

Have you seen any of the infants in the hallway today? You know what's wonderful about them? They have no price on their heads. If I went to a parent holding a child and said "I'll give you \$5,000 for your child." – "no." If I came

to you and said "I'll give you one percent of all the money in circulation for your child" you wouldn't – well, if you thought twice, something's wrong. You wouldn't think twice – "No, it's my child." That's when we understand the precious nature of life and of God's good gift. God came as that small child to win our hearts, to elicit our love.

What this God who is the God of all the talents wants from us is, I think, two things – One, something I brought up in my prayer talk Tuesday night. I think it's the thing and I'm going to be talking about it a lot – so get ready. I think the No. 1 thing we need to think about is availability. I read this in a book recently. It said "What God wants is our availability" and sometimes that's the one thing we are least prepared to give to God. We're not available – we're booked – we're over-committed – we're stressed – we're full of all this stuff – we are ridiculously busy. But God wants us to be available to God.

The other thing that God wants is for us to be awestruck. Think about those first poor people who heard Jesus say this parable, imagine how their jaws had to drop. Jesus says there was a man and he gave his first servant five talents, and they must have said, "You've got to be kidding me – five talents?" Their eyes must have flown wide open. Awe – can we hold God in awe?

I told some of you this story before, but it seems pertinent. A few years ago, I was invited to speak at a Clergy Conference, and the clergy were Pentecostals. Thought they had the wrong James Howell, but I drove there anyhow. And when I got there, my host greeted me and I said "Where on the program am I speaking?" He said

"Well, you're right after the first hymn." And I thought "Oh, I'd better get ready." Well, that was silly because they were Pentecostals. The first hymn took 45 minutes. And they started out singing together, and then gradually, they weren't singing together – different people in the room free-form, launched out, doing their own thing. I wanted to stay on the page, keep singing the song we were supposed to be singing. They were all doing their own thing and my host, I think out of respect to me, he stayed with the song for a little bit and then he just lost it. What he did, he stopped singing the song, he raised his arms to the ceiling and he looked up and for about 20 minutes, he muttered over and over "Oh Jesus, you are so beautiful. Oh Jesus, you are so beautiful. Oh Jesus, you are so beautiful." I was sitting there thinking that what I often do is I say "Oh, Jesus, my back hurts. Can you help me?" And he was saying "Oh Jesus, you are so beautiful.

We have a choice to make, I think. Are we going to shrink God down to size and have it all be about flattery of us or being donors and volunteers? Or are we going to be humble? Are we going to know the true God who is greater than all the wealth that we can begin to conceive to imagine? Can we fall in love with that God? Can we be awestruck by that God? Can we be available to that God? When we hear Jesus' story, do we throw up our hands in exasperation or do we love him and follow him? This God of all wonder came down as a child to show us the way, to receive our love, not to be hidden away in some back pocket but to be everything, our Lord.

Amen.

