P25A 2026 Matthew 25:14-30

One year, on this Sunday in the lectionary, a pastor, with the approval and cooperation of the Council, but as a surprise to the rest of the congregation, preached on this gospel passage and ended the sermon by handing out envelopes of cash to every person who was in worship to use as they saw fit: go to the grocery store and buy items for the food pantry; pool it with other members to do a big project in the church; put it right back in the collection plate. Spoiler alert: that's not how I'm ending today's sermon. I admire the pastor's creativity and moxie in arranging what I'm certain was a memorable object lesson; but I don't think we need to artificially re-create this experiment in a laboratory setting, because whether we realize it or not, we're already living it.

This is the second-to-last Sunday of the liturgical year, and in this season, the lectionary always points us to the end of times, to the eternal future, to the coming of Christ. Over three weeks we hear three stories from the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel: last week the 10 bridesmaids waiting with their oil lamps for the bridegroom; this week the three slaves left to manage their Master's talents; and next week, the king judging the nations, separating out the faithful as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. According to Matthew, these are Jesus' last parables and teaching before the plot to kill him unfolds. Jesus knows he is about to die, rise, and return to the Father; he knows that in his absence, his followers will face persecution; and although he does *not* know the day or hour of his coming, he does know that those who wait for him will need encouragement to remain vigilant and faithful until his return. So he tells these three stories that implore us to keep awake and ready, to stay engaged in the work of the kingdom, and to anticipate one day being held accountable not just for what we do but for the good and necessary work that we neglect to do.

In this middle story that we read today, a man of extraordinary wealth entrusts his property to three slaves before going on a journey. One receives five talents, one two, and another one, according to the ability of each slave. A talent was a huge amount of money: somewhere between 15 and 20 years worth of wages. So even the slave who only receives one talent is still entrusted with an extremely generous amount. Although three different amounts were to have been given according to three different sets of abilities, the slave who receives five talents and the slave who receives two talents both perform the same: they both double the master's money while he is gone. The master praises each of them for being trustworthy in a few things and promises to then put them in charge of many things; we might pause to wonder how unbelievably wealthy this man is if he thinks 100 years worth of wages counts as a just a few things.

But the story takes a sharp turn when the third slave returns the talent that he had kept buried out of fear of the master. So far as we know, hiding the money to keep it safe could have been an acceptable strategy: we never hear any investment instructions from the master when he hands out the talents. To be honest, if someone handed me a whole lot of money and told me they were coming back for it at some undisclosed point in the future, there's no way I would do anything with their property

that would be risky enough to double their money. And, if I watched two friends getting two times and five times the money that I was given, I think I would notice the comparative lack of confidence in me, and I'd be even more likely to play it safe. But perhaps what gets the slave in more trouble than failing to at least invest enough to earn interest is the little speech he gives to the master: *I know that you are a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter… Here, take back what is yours…*

The master does not appreciate this assessment of his character. *You knew, did you, that I expected unreasonable returns? Then you should have at least done the bare minimum of putting that money where it could have done some good and made some interest.* And that part is hard to argue. A talent doesn't go as far as it used to: in the long time that the master was away, inflation would have made that buried talent less valuable. By not doing anything with what he had been given, the slave essentially returns less to the master than what he was given. Whether he hid that talent out of genuine fear, as he claimed, or he was wicked and lazy as the master claimed, the slave produced less than nothing, and accordingly is removed from any opportunity for future ventures. Still, we have to ask if the slave is a reliable judge of character: although the master's response to his failure is harsh, the master did take the chance of entrusting ridiculous amounts of money to all three of his slaves, and he rewards them according to the fruitfulness of the work they did with it. Is the problem that the master really is unreasonable? Or is the problem that the third slave *thinks* he's so harsh that he frightens himself into inactivity?

You've probably heard this parable used in stewardship campaigns and sermons. If you've ever heard a plea from the church for your time, talent, and treasure, this passage especially rings a bell: the English translation even gives us the word *talent*, which of course means something different to us than "boat load of money" but has become a useful way to talk about what we have to offer. And to be sure, we can get a nice stewardship sermon here. But reading this within the context of chapter 25 and the whole of Matthew's gospel, I think there's a broader point: How do we perceive the character of our Master, and what do we think we're being called to do while we wait for his return?

If we think our God is a harsh god whose expectations of us are unreasonable or even impossible, we're likely to become immobilized by our own fear. We may take God's gifts—material gifts or gifts of grace—and keep them hidden, and dread the day when we have to give accounting for our lives. But that isn't a reflection on God; it shows our lack of faith in God's goodness, grace, and mercy. The irony is that God has tremendous faith in us! Look how much the master entrusted to his servants—even to the one who was known to lack the ability of the others. We don't serve a harsh God of unreasonable demands; we serve a God of abundant generosity who gives us so much in the hope that we will multiply it in faithful service—and we serve God by serving God's children, as we'll read even more about next week. May we not miss out on the abundance of God's goodness and grace because we have made too small the God who is so great.