



"God is Calling: Say Yes!" + Matthew 24:14-30
25th Sunday after Pentecost, November 19, 2023
"Stepping Stones Sunday"
Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

It is a joy to welcome Stepping Stones parents and children to worship today. To recap where we are for our guests and those who haven't been with us regularly, since the summer we have been careening through Jesus' parables in Matthew. It's been a wild and crazy ride.

We got started modestly enough in mid-July with the parable of the sower. This led to the perplexing one about the weeds and the wheat. The ones about yeast and the treasure in the field were a little easier. Then things ramped up with the unforgiving servant, the laborers in the vineyard, the wicked tenants, the wedding banquet, and last week the ten bridesmaids. More often than not we found characters who didn't get it being thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. The unforgiving servant. The man who infiltrated the wedding banquet. The five foolish bridesmaids, essentially, who are consigned to darkness when the door is shut in their faces. And today's poor third slave.

Are we at risk, too, if we don't get it? Jesus' parables are not just stories or illustrations, but puzzles with hidden meanings that we are called to decipher. When we do, we discover that each one opens up an astonishing truth about the kingdom of God and how the new order operates that Jesus has inaugurated – a new order that is the opposite of how class, politics, and social structure have functioned. Each parable reveals a different facet of God's kingdom, and together they shine like a diamond with a dazzling brilliance.

Today we have what is referred to as the parable of the talents – perhaps the most difficult of them all, because it sounds like it's all about judgment. Do good and you will be rewarded. We must be careful because this is the opposite of what our faith teaches us.

Let's look at what this isn't. NO: It is not a teaching moment about making money, although many have been tricked into assuming it is, since a talent is actually a measure of money. I once heard of a pastor who illustrated this reading by giving each person in the room a \$5 bill and telling them to invest it and report back -- a cheap (and expensive) gimmick.

Notice here that the master gives no instructions; he just hands the three slaves different amounts of money. And the word "Entrusted" in our translation is too suggestive; the original Greek merely says he "delivered his possessions to them," money being part of his possessions. There is nothing to imply that the man has any expectation of what they should do, other than hang on to what they were given. So why does the third slave get tossed into oblivion for doing just that? We'll get to that.

NO: This is not about using the talents God has given you. People get tricked by the word "talent" into assuming the parable is about gifts God gives us that we are supposed to be using for the

benefit of others. As in: God has given you the gift of music, so when you share this gift with others it is like multiplying the value of that ability. This can't be what's going on here, because the ultimate purpose of whatever God gives us is to return that to God, and we can do that just as well in solitude. A person who chooses to play their violin only alone in their room is using that gift to open their soul to God. Music in every circumstance is a powerful form of prayer.

Another NO: The different amounts given to each servant do not represent degrees of giftedness. As in, the one with five talents is a concert pianist and the one with only one talent is third clarinet in the pep band. Or that the one was given five talents because he had greater ability to use them. This reading would lead us down the dangerous path of judgment for third clarinetists. We are grateful that children want to be involved in music, from any seat in the band.

Instead of all this, what if we think of the talents in this parable as callings? Positions in which God has placed you where, if you say YES, you can make a difference?

Each of us has a calling. Not as in a vocation, but as in what you are positioned to do at any given moment. Each of us is uniquely positioned to make a difference in the world. Uniquely, because even though we are all created in God's image, each of us has our own special characteristics, personality and way of looking at the world, which by the way tells you how infinitely vast God's own character is.

Each of you grew up in your own set of circumstances, with challenges and afflictions and obstacles, and people around you who may or may not have supported you. But you lived through it, and your experience has molded you into a person like no other on the planet. And God is always calling each of us into a moment in which we can choose to step in and make a difference.

What is your moment? Is God calling you to take over the leadership of an organization you care passionately about? To *start* an organization for a purpose you care passionately about? To retire from such an organization so you can devote your life to other purposes you cherish? To run for elected office? To take a stand against an injustice you've witnessed? To speak out for someone whose voice is being suppressed? Or to bring it home, to serve on the church council? To teach Sunday School? To take communion to our homebound members? To help out on altar guild or with the coffee hour? And by the way, we have needs for people in all these leadership positions.

Or is fear going to get the better of you, like it did for that frightened and fearful third slave? Because fear is everywhere, waiting to pounce, it takes no effort for it to get the better of us. What if my organization goes under? What if I lose the election? What if I get attacked for speaking out? What if I drop the communion tray? What if Council turns out to be boring? (It's not – we laugh a lot and still manage to get stuff done.) What if I'm a bad Sunday School teacher? (There is no such thing; we give you the lessons and the kids will love whatever you do.)

The truth is that we are living in a culture of fear. Don't let it overwhelm you, like it did the third slave.

Instead, be prepared for when your moment comes – whether it's one big moment or a bunch of smaller ones – so that you can step into it and represent the living Christ, he who stepped into every moment that his Father lay before him, from miracles and healings down to confronting demons and dying on the cross. Then God's glory will be reflected in you just as it is in the diadem of Jesus' many parables.

God is calling. Say YES!