

HOARDING IN FEAR, INVESTING IN JOY

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Matthew 25:14-30

This past summer, a homeowner in Wildwood, New Jersey, was doing some landscaping around his house when he discovered something unexpected. As he dug into the soil, he unearthed a hidden cache of money—ten- and twenty-dollar bills rolled tightly in brown paper and tied with string and then wrapped in burlap. He found two such bundles buried in glass jars. The amount of money totaled \$2000, and all the bills were dated 1934.¹

The mystery of the buried treasure has not been solved. But given the date on the bills, the leading theory is that in 1934, at the height of the Great Depression, someone felt that their money would be safer buried under the house than being placed in a bank. Adjusting for inflation, that \$2000 would be worth \$44,000 today. Someone buried \$44,000 dollars in the ground and then lost it.

I was reminded of this story this week as I was studying our reading from the Gospel of Matthew that reading also features money buried in the ground.

In this reading, we find a parable that we call the Parable of the Talents. This entire parable, as told by Jesus, is based on a preposterous premise. The parable tells of a man who is about to go away for an undetermined period of time. Before he leaves, he calls in three of his servants and places on them the responsibility over his wealth, or at least a part of it. To one servant he gives five talents, to another two talents. The third servant receives just a single talent. The man gives to each, as the parable explains, *according to their ability*. The man then leaves town for parts unknown.

Now, a man taking a trip is not preposterous. However, entrusting his servants with eight talents of his wealth certainly is. A single talent alone is a preposterous amount of money. What is a talent? Talent is a Greek word that we have appropriated in English to describe the special abilities that some people possess—a talent for music, a talent for art, a talent for juggling chainsaws. But in this parable, the meaning of talent is money—an absurd amount of money.

So, how much is a talent? A talent is a weight of gold roughly equal to 6000 denarius. A denarius is a day's wage for a laborer. And my back-of-the-envelope figuring tells me that a talent today would be worth about one million dollars. To the people of Jesus' day, a talent would also carry the implication of time. People

¹ <https://www.nj.com/cape-may-county/2022/07/jersey-shore-buried-cash-enigma-deepens-with-discovery-of-more-money.html>

generally talked about a talent as representing twenty years of labor—essentially a lifetime. Whether it is a lifetime of labor or a million bucks, a talent is a lot.

So, in this parable, a man goes on a journey and entrusts three of his servants with five million dollars, two million dollars, and one million dollars respectively. Right away, the people hearing this would be snicker with disbelief. The master must be out of his mind. Who would entrust three servants that that sort of wealth?

The next question is, what do the servants then do with this windfall? What would we do in this situation? What would we do if our boss came to us and said, “My wife and I have bought an RV. We’re going to travel the country, visit the grandkids. We may be gone for a while. Take care of this for me,” and hands us a duffel bag full of cash.

The first servant, the one who was given five talents, takes the money and does business with it. Maybe he invested it in a hot real estate deal or maybe he bought some cryptocurrency. It doesn't matter. He worked the money, and he doubled it.

The second servant does the same and doubles his talents from two to four. (Where are these guys when you need a new investment manager?)

The third takes a different path. He chooses not to do any business—no investing, or buying property, or speculating on pork bellies. He does nothing other than dig a hole in the ground and bury the million dollars. That’s all. He dug a hole and buried it.

After a long time, the master of the three servants returns from his travels and he calls the men in for an accounting of the money in their care. The first reported how he had doubled his money. The master is pleased and says to him, *Well done, good and trustworthy servant; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.* The scene is repeated with the second servant who is also invited into the joy of his master.

Then we get to the third servant, the one who buried his talent in the ground. He approaches the master and says bluntly, *I knew that you were a harsh man... so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.* The master is not too happy with this and calls the servant *wicked and lazy* and tells him that at the very least he should have placed the money with the bankers where it would have collected interest. That would have been better than nothing. The master orders that the talent be taken from the servant and be given to the one who has ten.

The master says, *For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* At this point, the parable goes from

being a teaching to a commentary on the end times. The judgment on the money-burying servant is to lose everything and then be cast into the outer darkness.

As we hear this parable we ask the question, “Why did the third servant bury the money?” The answer, clearly, is fear. He says so, in fact. He says that he knows the master to be a harsh man who takes what he has not earned. In his fear, the servant simply hides the money. For him, that was the safest course of action. The money would be there when the master returned. He has done nothing wrong and the master should be pleased.

It is easy to see that this parable plays as an allegory and the master is God. And for the third servant, the master is indeed harsh because that is how the servant chooses to view the master. If you believe that God is demanding and judgmental, then that is the god you will find. But to the other servants who were entrusted with money, the master is trusting and gracious. That is how they choose to see him. He hands over eight million dollars and walks away. The first two servants are willing to take a risk with the money. That risk pays off. However, if they had lost money, they didn’t fear the master.

This sermon today is the start of a series on money. This is the time of year that churches ask their members to make a financial pledge to the church for the coming year. This makes it an especially appropriate time to talk about money. In fact, I have invited some of you to share your stories on why you give to the church.

Giving is not just a means to support the church and its ministries; giving is also an expression of our relationship with God; a sign of our joy for God’s love. God has blessed us all. Do we choose to take these gifts but then in fear do nothing? Or do we invest our gifts in the ministries of the church, in the work of God’s kingdom, in the name of God’s love? What we find in this parable is that when we view God as love then the risks are minimized; the gifts of God will always multiply.

This parable is also about waiting. As we wait for the day of the Lord, whatever that may look like, how do we wait? Do we take what God gives us and bury it in the sand or do we take what God has given us and work God's will with it? In the parable, the servants are servants of the master. They are extensions of him. In his absence, they become him to the world. As God's people, we too are extensions of God; we are to be extensions of God's work. Matthew has made it clear to his people that God's kingdom is accompanied by feeding the hungry, curing the sick, blessing the meek, and serving the least—doing God’s work.

I’m haunted by the story of the buried money found in New Jersey. Who buried it and why? How did it get forgotten? Did the loss of the money hurt the family?

That story is not unlike Jesus' parable. Yes, the money was buried in a time of fear. But by burying the money, the one's who buried it lost everything. Ninety years later, their money was given to someone else.

In the same way, the servant who buried the talent risked nothing and lost everything. The money was taken from him, and he was banished to the *outer darkness*.

In the church today, are we driven by fear or by joy? Do we choose to take the road that leads to the outer darkness where there is pain and despair? Or do we choose the path of God's love that brings us to the realm of joy? How do we choose to use our talents?