

Gospel: Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus told his disciples this parable:

"A man going on a journey

called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them.

To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one--
to each according to his ability.

Then he went away.

Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them,
and made another five.

Likewise, the one who received two made another two.

But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground
and buried his master's money.

After a long time

the master of those servants came back
and settled accounts with them.

The one who had received five talents came forward
bringing the additional five.

He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents.

See, I have made five more.'

His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

Since you were faithful in small matters,

I will give you great responsibilities.

Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received two talents also came forward and said,

'Master, you gave me two talents.

See, I have made two more.'

His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant.

Since you were faithful in small matters,

I will give you great responsibilities.

Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said,

'Master, I knew you were a demanding person,

harvesting where you did not plant

and gathering where you did not scatter;

so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground.

Here it is back.'

His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant!

So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant

and gather where I did not scatter?

Should you not then have put my money in the bank
so that I could have got it back with interest on my return?
Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten.
For to everyone who has,
more will be given and he will grow rich;
but from the one who has not,
even what he has will be taken away.
And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside,
where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth."

Gospel Study: *Use It or Lose It*

I was at a party and sitting next to this gentleman who had been drinking a while. You know how some people start philosophizing and theologizing and really sitting back and sharing all their wisdom after a few beers? This guy turned to me and said, "Father, you know life is short and we can't take anything with us." He then added an interesting observation, "I never saw a U-Haul follow a hearse." I said to him, "That's true. That's true." He said, "You can't take anything with you and so my motto is: use it or lose it."

And I thought, "That's good, I can go with that motto." So that's the title I've given to this parable: *Use It or Lose It*. As we look at this parable, it's the second of three consecutive parables that are about Jesus' second coming. We can understand almost immediately who the Master is in the story; he represents Christ himself. And by the suggestion, as Jesus says, the man goes off on a journey. There's a hint here about Jesus' own ascension into Heaven, and he entrusts his servants—and the servants are all of us here—with his funds. He distributes his funds according to each man's abilities. Now it's interesting that the Master had calculated and distributed these mutual funds, if you will, according to each man's abilities. In fact, what he gave them, we're told, was these silver pieces. In some of your Bibles, you would notice, the word is *talents*. The Jewish talent was the largest silver coin in Jesus' time. A single talent would be equivalent today to about \$1000 in a modern economy. One commentator I read suggested it would be worth 15 years of wages for a worker back then. Did you know that's where we get the word talent today? A talent is that natural ability given to each person. In those days it was money; in these days it's God-given gifts.

In either case, please understand this double meaning. It provides a wonderful insight into the teaching of this parable. Given the great value of these talents, or silver pieces, when the Master gave the first servant five talents, or perhaps 75 years of wages, he just won the lottery. The second would have received 30 years of wages and the third 15 years' worth. It's not important so much the precise monetary amount. What is important is that we see the vast and huge sum of money given to these men. The Master is overly generous and almost, it would seem, overly confident.

It's amazing the confidence he shows in these men by entrusting them with his funds. Then he went off. Again, this suggests how the Lord gives us so much in terms of gifts and talents and time to be used as we would see. Notice though, the Master doesn't hang around looking over their shoulders and checking in on them. This suggests, again, tremendous trust in which God has in us. Immediately—notice the word immediately—the man with the five talents went to invest it and made another five. In the same way the man who received the two doubled his figure. The man who received one, however, went off and dug a hole in the ground where he buried his Master's money.

I learned this week, in studying this parable, that in first century Palestine, burying money was the safest way of keeping it and protecting it. It's like the equivalent today of putting it in the bank. You know it's not going to do much there, but it's safe. It's secure. Clearly he was playing it safe; doing what he thought was in his best interest. Keep that in mind...*in his best interest*.

Then, after a long absence...and what is that long absence for us? It is the time between when we are born and when Christ comes again for us. The Master returns and calls an accounting of his servants. Here we again have the word Master. We will hear also the word Lord, *Kyrias*. Remember, of course, *Kyrie Eleison*; the Greek word for the Lord. This parable suggesting the final judgment, that we will all be called to and held accountable for. At that point the man who had received the five talents came forward bringing an additional five. "My Lord," he said, "you let me have five, see I've made five more. His Master said to him, "Well done. You are an industrious and reliable servant. Since you were dependable in a small matter, I will put you in charge of larger affairs. Come, share your Master's joy."

It occurred to me as I read that...How does the Master reward him for a job well done? He gives him another job. Does this sound familiar? If you do something well, watch out, you'll be asked to do more. Right? You've heard the saying, *If you want to have something done, ask a busy person*. They know how to be responsible and get things done. The point here is, it is a blessing to be given these responsibilities because they're all opportunities for what? They are opportunities for investing God's wealth; His goodness. Consider that, as we are called to service ourselves. What is the reward? The very work itself carries a certain reward; that we could even do God's work.

I will never forget the time when I had just finished preaching a mission—four evenings in the parish. I gave my very best. I think it went well, but I was surprised that no one on the staff—no one—at any time during the mission, even at the end, bothered to say thanks. I was really hurt by that. I was even a little angry at it. I was even telling God about that on the way back. I was driving and saying, "God, isn't that something. People are so ungrateful today. Blah, blah, blah and on and on." But, you know, it's always dangerous when you talk to God about these things. In a flash moment he reminded me, "Ahem, Jim. You have never bothered to thank *Me* for the privilege to be able to preach the mission to my people." I'm telling you, I almost had a wreck. He literally turned me all the way around and I saw what a gift it is to give; what a gift it is to do

His work. I had lost sight of that. Ever since then I said, "Please God, I pray, that I would never be concerned about who thanks me except that I would thank you to be able to do your work."

I'm reminded of a much greater preacher—Billy Graham—who, I think has been so blessed with many talents that he has used so well for the service of the Lord. I'm sure you would agree. I saw an interview that David Frost the British television commentator asked Billy Graham this question. He said, "Billy, after you die, what do you want people to say about you?" You know what Billy Graham said, "I don't care what anybody says about me after I die, except for one person and that is the Lord. I would want Him to say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'" Wow. This is what I thought, "He will truly say that to Billy Graham, well done."

Further in the interview Billy Graham shared that he feels this urgency to do more for God. Mind you, the interviewer David Frost said, "Aren't you interested in retiring?" He said, "You know I've learned no one retires from doing the Lord's work." Wow. Do you hear this? Because this is what the man with one talent did. He retired his talent. Now I want to say something to those who are retired. It's okay to retire from work as long as you understand you can never retire from God's work. I'm not talking about what you do, so much as who you are. Do you understand? Look at Cardinal Bernardin, who has had to retire from his administrative responsibilities and leadership of the Archdiocese of Chicago, given his terminal sickness and impending death, but in his dying he is doing more to give witness about how to live for the Lord; how to surrender to the Lord. What a gift. What a gift.

What is the Lord calling us to? We continue the parable and the man with the two talents stepped forward. Now, mind you, this guy could have done what I do sometimes and say, "How come I didn't get as much?" I might say, "God, when you were distributing talents, how come you didn't give me more intelligence?" You know I often wonder that. The important thing is that each man and woman is given just the right amount for who he or she is. You know what I'm saying? God knew we could only handle so much responsibility. He knows what we need and what will be asked of us: To do all that we can to use what He has given; sometimes a little can do much more than a lot. Does that make sense? God uses little people, little people, to do powerful works, His work; His miracle.

The man with two talents stepped forward and handed back double the amount of his investment and again the Master said, "Well done," or, "cleverly done." He invites him, "Come, share your Master's joy." Of course, that image is loaded with the best vision of Heaven: "Come. Share the richness, all the wealth of God, all the gifts of eternal life and happiness." Can you hear the Master's delight in the servants who proved themselves to be industrious and enterprising, using their works and doing good works? It suggests to me how God must be so happy when we're using our time and talents to the full; when we're becoming the best of who we are.

St. Athanasius said it best—I remember this quote—he said, "God is glorified in His people who are fully alive." God is glorified in His people who are fully alive. Our greatest compliment to

God is to appreciate what He's given us and give it back to Him; by sharing it and by giving it to others.

Finally, this third servant who received one talent stepped forward, "My Lord," he said, "I knew you were a hard man. You reap where you did not sew...gather where he did not scatter. So out of fear—Did you hear that word?—so out of fear, I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here is your money back.

Take a step back for a moment. Don't you feel a little sorry for this guy? He tried to do what he thought was best. He was afraid, but what we see here is such an important lesson. Please hear this well. I think fear is one of the worst things that paralyzes us, immobilizes us, and prohibits us from becoming and doing what God is asking and wanting for our lives. Would you agree? There is fear of failure; fear of what others might say; fear of what could happen, or repercussions. Fear is the strategy of Satan. Fear is the way the devil gets us not to do God's work. I've seen it paralyze so many people. In fact, doesn't fear affect us all in some way?

This servant, notice, never did anything bad. It's just that he didn't really do anything that was good. You see what I'm saying? This is very important. How do we bury our talents, except to keep it to ourselves? I think all of us are in for a little surprise at our judgment tape. The Lord wants to give us a preview of this judgment, that we could see ourselves as He sees us, which is to see all the goodness in us. Now again, consider...if you're like me, I never—and I'm not trying to present any false humility here, it's just the truth how I feel—I never felt I was very talented until I read this great quote from Pope John XXIII. He said, "Whoever has a heart of love, always has something to give." Isn't that a great quote? "Whoever has a heart of love, always has something to give." Who of us don't have a great deal of love we could give? Consider even more, we—everybody here today—has been given the greatest treasure, which is our faith. So many people in the world really do not have faith. How have we kept that faith buried inside ourselves? How have we failed to invest, spread, and share that with others?

Brothers and sisters, if we have not been so bold to talk about our love for the Lord, and the good works that the Lord can do, and the benefits of faith, then hear this next line because it is addressed to all of us. His Master said, "You worthless, lazy, lout." Those are hard words. You know what I find most interesting about this? The poor guy was trying to say, "Look Master what kept me from doing anything was I was afraid. I was afraid of you." Well, his Master has a whole different perception. He's saying, "No, your good intentions are not good enough. The truth is you were lazy. The truth is, this is not a good enough excuse."

You know, we could all give excuses: Lord, you know I would've done this but... I would've done this but... I would've done this but...

You've heard me say before, "You can't get to Heaven on your butts." The Master in the parable says, "Get busy. Just do it. You know what I'm asking of you. If you know what I'm asking of

you, then do what you can do. Don't be afraid of failure for I will be with you. That's the whole point."

He goes on and says—and this is surprising—he tells his other servants, "Take the one away from the man give it to the man with ten." Isn't that a little bit ironic? The man was afraid of losing it to begin with; which is why he kept it to himself. Yet eventually, ultimately, he lost it anyway. I think that's what we're afraid will happen and yet, so many times you know, it's a self-fulfilling prophecy; our own fear. We need to trust. We need to have confidence. You know what confidence means? The word *con-fideo*, with faith. And where do we put our faith? We put it in God; even more than ourselves. And so, it is the Lord who leads us to invest our time and talents; but where and how? We need to be as wise with our time and talent as we are with our money. Amen? Certainly they are just as precious, if not more so. We need to learn this lesson.

Let me end on the point of the parable that suggests, "Throw this worthless servant into the darkness outside where he can wail and grind his teeth." That's an awful image of final condemnation at the end of time. This is in contrast to the beautiful world that's promised to those who spend themselves; spend themselves. Invest themselves in life and in others and in love. We are told, "Come. Share your Master's joy."

To summarize, this truly is a parable of the talents. Jesus is our Master. We are his servants. He puts tremendous trust in us by giving us tremendous gifts: gifts of faith, gifts of love. Even, can you hear this, gifts of our own suffering. That is a precious gift not to be wasted. Even in our suffering...I go and visit these old people who are in nursing homes, dying. I have found in their suffering they're most united to Christ and their intercession is so powerful for others. We should waste nothing, for everything is a gift of God. A wise servant knows that, and sees that, and uses everything as an opportunity of giving back to God and to others what God gives to us. Jesus delights in that kind of attitude of gratitude that we can take.

I'd like to ask some serious questions today too. These questions are: What are the most important gifts, and talents, that you have been given? What are they? Secondly: How can you use these gifts to better serve God and serve others? I'd like to spotlight a few people who I think give great testimony, who I think are great examples who use their time and talents. You may have read about this simple woman, Oseola McCarty. She was simply a servant, washing and ironing clothes for a wealthy family. She saved most of her money, most of her life, and set up a scholarship fund for disadvantaged children to be able to go to a university. She had very little, but one of her great treasures was the Bible that she read every day. It's so inspiring to read this beautiful article about Oseola McCarty and how she gives.

One of my favorite stories of a man who used his talents, is a man who woke up one morning, and reading the newspaper, was shocked to read his own obituary. Can you imagine seeing your own death notice in the paper? Here the reporter had obviously mistaken his brother, who had just died, with him. Once he recovered from this initial shock, he read with a great deal of

interest what they had to say about him. He then had an even greater shock because the obituary title headline read: *Dynamite King Dies*. The article went on to identify him—as truly he was the inventor of dynamite—and then described him as a quote "merchant of death and destruction." The article went on to explain that he had amassed a great deal of fortune and fame for himself by manufacturing weapons of destruction. When he read that, some power came over him that was greater and more powerful than dynamite. He believes it was the power of God's insight that showed him how he needed to change his life. In that moment, he made what he believes was the most important decision of his life. He redirected his energy, and much of his money, to establishing an award system for accomplishments that would constructively and creatively benefit humanity. Today this man is known not as a merchant of death and destruction, but throughout the world he is known as the founder of the annual Nobel prize: in Physics, in Chemistry, in Medicine, in Literature and in Peace. This man I speak of, is Alfred Nobel. What a great story of a man who used his talents to encourage the talents of so many others.

Amen.