

Sunday November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Matthew 25:14-30  
“Waste Not Want Not”

There are some really awful movies and television shows out there, but one of the worst movies I’ve ever seen is one called, “South of Wawa”. It is poorly written, badly acted, and most people have never seen it, or even heard of it. I only mention it today, because that awful movie was shot in my grandparent’s house in Stayner Ontario. My Uncle and Aunt, who were executors of my grandparent’s estate, arranged for this cinematic debacle to be filmed in the house. One scene in particular caused a lot of consternation in our family, as a rather risquer scene transpires in my grandparent’s bedroom.

It is surprising how exciting people think it is to have a film or television crew use your home for a story. But I offer you another cautionary tale. While scouting locations for a popular TV series, an advance team came upon the perfect site for an action scene; an impressive house with a beautiful, large, lush, green lawn. The script called for the cars to be spinning out of control and crashing on the lawn, tearing out shrubs and mowing down flower beds.

The residents of the south Florida home were so infatuated by the possibility of having their house prominently featured on a prime-time TV show, that they eagerly gave their consent. Days later, the film crew arrived and began shooting the scene. Cars driven by Hollywood stunt drivers were soon racing wildly across the front lawn, violently ripping up the beautiful grass, shrubs and flowers.

That was when a neighbor called the owner of the house—in New York! You see, the TV scouts had asked the residents of the house for permission to film, not realizing that they were only tenants who had absolutely no authority to allow the property to be harmed, much less destroyed. Understandably, the owner in New York was not a happy man, the TV director was embarrassed, and the residents were soon looking for a new place to live.

We all understand that renters are not owners; they are stewards. The biggest difference between renters and owners can be defined with two words: rights and responsibilities. Owners have rights. Stewards have responsibilities. Before us today is a parable that is of a great challenge to me personally. Its one I would rather avoid, and looking back through my preaching history, I have haven’t touched it for decades, at least the Matthew version.

Like many of you, I grew up thinking this parable meant one thing, but recently I’ve been leaning toward interpreting it a completely different way. But when you’ve done it one way for so long, and you’ve heard sermons and preached a certain way, its hard to accept that you were wrong. So, I stand before you today and confess that I maybe have been wrong about this parable.

Let me explain. Traditionally, we read the story of a man, obviously a rich man, who is going away to some unspecified destination. He entrusts his servants with his “talents), meaning gold coins, to look after, and by implication, help the talents grow. One servant goes out, and turns the five talents entrusted to him into ten. The servant entrusted with two talents turns that into four, but the one entrusted with one, digs a hole and buries it.

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The master returns and calls his servants to give an accounting. The first two servants are praised for doubling the talents, and are entrusted with more responsibility. The third servant though comes with his one talent, and admits he buried it to keep it safe. He explains that he did so because the master was a harsh man, taking crops where he did not sow. The third servant is called wicked and chastised for not even entrusting the talent to a banker to gain interest. His talent is taken away, and given to the one who has ten and then he is dragged away and tossed into darkness where there is gnashing of teeth.

Do you see a problem with this scene? Often this passage is used by preachers and churches to guilt people into serving more. Don't waste your talents we are told. Part of this interpretation comes from the fact that the word used here is "talent", but the meaning between the talents of this passage and how we use the word are quite different. Looking at this parable, is this how you see the Gospel? How is this good news? Is this the God of Grace that we worship and that Jesus told us about?

In all honesty, I've always been uncomfortable with the end of this story, but you have to admit, as a pastor who is trying to recruit people to serve in the church, it really packs a punch. But in the end, it seems manipulative, and paints God as an evil tyrant. However, if you think this version is rough, look at how Luke tells it. "But as for these enemies of mine [referring to the servant who hid the money] who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence." ([Luke 19:27, NRSV](#))

I want us to reset the story in a different context. I want to apply two of my favorite words to this passage: what if? What if the way we normally use this passage is not at all what Jesus meant for this parable. What if the master in the parable doesn't represent God at all, but he represents the Roman Empire. Don't get me wrong. The Bible definitely teaches that the Holy Spirit gives us gifts that we are to use to build up the body of Christ. There are many places that teach that. I just don't think this is one of them.

Let me show you why I think this might be true. I have said many times that you can't rip a passage out of the context. You have to see where the story falls in the larger telling of the gospel. In Matthew's version of the story, Jesus is talking about the end of things, and what it will be like when he returns. He told them right before this parable, that no one knows when he will return. Like the bridesmaids, you will just have to wait. Then, in verse 31, he says when the son of Man returns.

You see, I think the parable of the talents is a contrast story. Notice how it doesn't start out by saying, "the Kingdom of Heaven is like." It says that while you are waiting, it is as if... and then the son of man will come. In other words, this parable demonstrates how the world is in the meantime. I invite you to look at the story again, only this time looking at it as if the master were the Roman Empire, or any society that thinks its in control.

I think we can all relate to this story now. This is how the world functions.

<b>Wealth Range</b>	<b>Wealth</b>	<b>Global Share (%)</b>	<b>Adult Populat</b>
Over \$1M	\$191.6 trillion	45.8%	Held by 1.1%
\$100k-\$1M	\$163.9 trillion	39.1%	Held by 11.1%
\$10k-\$100k	\$57.3 trillion	13.7%	Held by 32.8%
Less than \$10k	\$5.5 trillion	1.3%	Held by 55.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$418.3 trillion</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>Held by 100.0%</b>

The distribution of wealth in Canada is very unequal. The top 20% of households in this country own about 67% of the total wealth and the bottom 20% of households own less than 1%. Sobering thoughts aren't they. Here's the question for us today. Where's Jesus in this parable? Where is the Gospel, the Good News? I think there are two reasons Jesus told this story.

The first reason was to warn his disciples; to warn us. The world powers do not play according to God's ways. When you resist them, you will probably get hurt. Being a follower of Jesus means swimming against the stream of injustice and greed and power. The second reason ties directly with our habit of service. Where is Jesus in this scene? Is he over here rewarding the rich who get richer at the expense of the poor?

No. I think Jesus is over here with the one talent man. He is with the people who have been thrown out on the trash heap where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We say it every time we recite the Apostle's Creed. He descended into Hell. The author of Hebrews gives us a challenge that speaks to this. In Hebrews chapter 13, verses 12-13 it says, "Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured." (Hebrews 13:12-13, NRSV)

Jesus invites us to join him out here. I think this is the point of this passage, because in the very next passage he says that when the Son of Man appears (in contrast to the way the world works) he will separate the sheep from the goats. However, the criteria for the separation, is based on this. What did you do for the least of these? We are doing some great things as a church family in this regard.

First Serving. Caring Cupboard. The Pregnancy resource center, Operation Eyesight and others. These are extremely important activities. We are helping to feed hungry people and restore health to others. But there is a small danger in these events. They can almost be like a vaccination against poverty. You get just enough of an exposure to it, that you don't have to think about it any more.

I don't have the answer. Honestly, I get overwhelmed when I think about all the needs and crises in this world. But this I know. Jesus stands out here among the ones in darkness and gnashing of teeth. God does not play the same game as the world powers. The people of God are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus, and to stand against that kind of system the master in the parable demonstrated.

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Mark Hatfield, the one-time senator from Oregon, was heard to say, “Christianity was born in Israel. They took it to Greece and made it a Philosophy. They took it to Rome and made it into an institution. They took it to the rest of Europe and made it into a culture. They brought it to America, where they made it into a business enterprise.” Who can deny the truth of such a profound observation.

When Hitler came to power, he recognized that it was necessary to pacify the church lest it become a countervailing power to his totalitarian goals. In order to pacify the church, he called Pastor’s together to explain to them the good he had in mind for Germany. The young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was among the pastors gathered for this occasion, listened to Adolf Hitler explain that he would in no way interfere with their ministry to the needy souls of Germany.

Bonhoeffer followed Hitler’s presentation with a simple statement: “I am concerned about the souls of the people, but I am also concerned about the soul of the nation. What will happen to the soul of the nation in the days that lie ahead?” As Hitler stomped out of the room, he was overheard to remark, “Let these pastors worry about the souls of me. I will take care of the soul of the nation!” (Campolo, Let me Tell You a Story, p. 87)

This story clearly illustrates the truth that it is never enough to just minister to the needs of individuals. God has called us to not only bring people to Christ but also wrestle against the principalities and powers of the rulers of this age. (see Eph. 6:12)

As we focus on our habit of service, we can ask God to show us how we might be able to become more aware of the one talent servants around us each day. To stand with them in the face of overwhelming challenges brought on by the powers and principalities arrayed against them. To address the soul of our community as well as the individuals we encounter. It’s what Jesus did all the time and still does through us. How can we do anything less?