

Preserving the Faith as Unfaithfulness

A Sermon by Stephen Hollaway,
Baptist Campus Minister, Columbia University

Text: Matthew 25:14-30 (Today's English Version)

The parable of the talents used to haunt me, like a recurring nightmare. When I was in college, trying to decide about a major and a career, I could see myself burying a talent that I didn't even recognize and being cast into the outer darkness. The very mention of the word "talented" would give rise to a certain anxiety along with the pleasure of a compliment. No doubt many of you have been labelled "talented" or "gifted" at some point and instructed that this is a terrible burden. "To whom much is given" and all that stuff.

My particular burden was writing. I suppose it still is; those who have heard me read poems might be able to judge how heavy or light that burden is. John Milton made a deep impression on me in my freshman year. In one sonnet written on his twenty-third birthday he reflected on how quickly his youth had passed and how little he had accomplished. That was bad enough, but it was his mid-life crisis sonnet which had one line which stuck with me: "That one talent which is death to hide/Lodged with me useless." That used to spook me. I was accountable. Anything less than the Nobel Prize would mean judgment.

What was — or is - your talent? We have a rather narrow range of things we classify as talent. My wife Becca could draw as a child so that stamp was on her: artist. Some of you have obvious musical talents. Did you ever feel God would cast you into the outer darkness if you didn't practice your piano? I am calling forth all these memories for one purpose: so that we might set them aside. I want us to approach this story as if we'd never heard it before. The word "talent" came into English from this parable, transliterated from Greek. Originally, a talent was a Babylonian measure of weight. Later, it came to mean the largest denomination of money. It is an interpretation of Jesus' parable which has given us the word talent referring to natural ability.

But what did Jesus mean by this story of three servants who held money in trust? Matthew places the story in a collection of Jesus' teachings about readiness for the last judgment and makes the story refer to the second coming. But if we take the parable on its own, we can see that like most of the parables this one is aimed at Jesus' opponents, the pious Jews who were the trustees of the Law. What was the most valuable thing God had entrusted to his servants? It was the Scriptures — the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the law of Moses; the words spoken by the prophets — and what had the servants done with this endowment? They had sought to *preserve* it intact. This is the thrust of the parable: preserving the faith is not enough. It must be invested, put to work. Jesus' judgment on the religious leaders is found in Matt. 21:43 — "The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce the proper fruits." Couldn't this be a "moral" to the parable of the three servants? The next verse adds: "The chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables and knew he was talking about *them*."

With this in mind, let us look at the story again. A man leaves on a trip and puts his servants in charge. We see this motif over and over in the parables. Jesus understood that in our experience God *is* like a man on a trip; we feel that we have been left in charge. Certainly God *has* withdrawn enough that we are required to exercise responsibility. He does not instruct us in particulars, but gives us free rein — at least for a time.

The three servants do not receive equal amounts. That's just the way life is — although you notice that the *rewards* are equal for the one with 5000 and the one with 2000. The first two servants invest the money and make 100% profit or interest. I don't know *how* — but you see in verse 19 that the master stayed away for a *long* time. What does the third servant do? He *hides* the money to keep it safe. There were no banks as we know them in ancient Palestine, no safety deposit boxes. Burying money was a perfectly legal and acceptable means of keeping it secure. The point is not that the third servant did something silly or stupid, but that he was *too* careful, over-cautious with what he held in trust.

The first part of the story is a set-up for the return of the

master. The first two servants give brief answers of ten words each (in Greek) and receive the approval of the master. Well done. They are *good* and *faithful*. Their reward is to be invited into the joy of the master. The word translated “joy” can also mean “feast” — a brightly lit banquet hall contrasted with the darkness outside. The third servant has much more to say — 30 words instead of 10 — in explaining why he has acted so conservatively. He accuses the master of being harsh and demanding. The third servant is called *bad* and *lazy*. Then he’s fired and not invited to the feast at all.

Isn’t this a little harsh? The poor guy didn’t *steal* the money, after all; he returned every penny entrusted to him. What does the master expect, anyway? That this judgment made the early Christians uncomfortable can be seen in the fact that an adapted version of this story circulated in the early church. It made the first servant the investor who was rewarded; the second servant saved the money and was merely scolded; the third servant wasted the money on wine and women — so he was cast into the outer darkness.

But this is not the story *Jesus* told. (I’m afraid it’s the story Baptists have told.) Jesus was not concerned about the problem of wild living. On the contrary, Jesus was concerned about the problem of *conservative* living. The third servant is punished because he did nothing but preserve what he had been given. His action revealed that his basic motivation was *fear* and not *love*. He did not truly love the master, or he would have been willing to *risk* his own punishment in order to better the master.

This is what Jesus saw all around him: a conservative religion of fear and not love which understood its chief end to be the preservation of the laws and traditions entrusted to it by its Lord. Does this sound familiar? One scholar (Klausner) has written: “The Judaism of that time had no other aim than to save the tiny nation, the guardian of great ideals, from sinking into the broad sea of heathen culture.” Does this sound familiar? Could we not describe the church in the ‘80’s in the same way? Is the “preservation of Judeo-Christian values” or “defending the Word of God” really what the Master is asking of us in our day? Jesus says *no*: merely to *preserve* the faith is to be *unfaithful*. Such an emphasis is not merely mediocre; it is *bad* and *lazy*.

So why do we choose to preserve our faith, rather than risking it and putting it to work? Why do we feel the need to bury the Scriptures and protect them? There are three reasons we can draw from this parable:

1. *We find ourselves in a hostile world.* Why did the servant bury the money? So that it would not be stolen. The world, for him, was full of thieves and those who would try to take the money. The world was a place of risk, not opportunity. The third servant lived his life defensively, lest he end up with less than he started with. It's the only way to live, when the world is hostile and they're all out to get you.

In our Southern Baptist Convention, there are many who want nothing more than to preserve the faith once delivered. This is understandable. They are not fools or thieves. They are the third servants who find themselves in a hostile world, adrift in a sea of paganism, and they feel that the faith and the Bible are in danger. Their fearful response is to bury the faith and the Bible to preserve them from change or loss. Some of our fundamentalist brothers and sisters are afraid because they find themselves in an urban culture and they have rural ways of thinking; the old-time religion is a way of holding on to a disappearing culture. Some find the world hostile because they find themselves in a pluralistic society as one among equals, when they thought that they were a majority faith. Some are fearful because their children or grandchildren have grown up differently or even badly — and their faith is a cry of pain and loss.

So we do not merely mock these people, but we do speak a word of judgment, for they have made a fundamental error. The urge to preserve is not the same as faith. It may even be its opposite. This is a word from Jesus.

But let's move from "them" — the fundamentalists out there — to "us." Do we find ourselves in a hostile world? Let's admit it: for many of us, New York City is a hostile world and we come to church as a refuge. This is a legitimate ministry, but we cannot stop there or let refuge be our purpose for being. Without a positive attitude toward this city our faith becomes defensive. We become the third servant, burying our faith for safekeeping. Even if the city still feels hostile to you, you are called to risk your faith by exposing it to all the challenges

—poverty, wealth, power, powerlessness, cynicism, fanaticism, whatever — that your faith may grow and multiply.

A second reason we choose to preserve our faith is:

2. *We are afraid of God.* The third servant may have been making excuses when he said that the master was a hard man and that he was afraid, but I think there is something of a confession there. Jesus knew that fear was the motivator of the religious conservatives of his day. That fear was paralyzing. But the root problem was their view of God.

Are you basically afraid of God? When you listen to much of the religious language of Baptist preachers, you hear people desperate for some protection from God. We may say that Jesus saves us from our sin, but the functional meaning — the subtext, if you will — is that Jesus saves us from God. Because God is mad and he is bound to destroy us. Friends, the message of Jesus' life is that God is about forgiveness and healing. Our feelings toward God are to be trust and thankfulness. As long as we are focused on judgment rather than grace, our faith is afraid to act and becomes survivalist, protectionist, preservationist.

A third reason we choose to preserve our faith is:

3. *We are lazy.* It's right there in the master's words: "You bad and lazy servant!" It may seem too untheological to explain our faith problem as laziness, but I think Jesus is giving us a real clue here. In *The Road Less Traveled*, Scott Peck makes a case that original sin is laziness; it is the manifestation in daily life of entropy, that force which pulls us back into the easy path and away from spiritual growth. Peck even explains the fall of Adam and Eve as laziness, because they took a short cut and avoided the work of going back to God and questioning God: *Why* did you say not to eat of that tree? That would have been too hard. So they took the bad and lazy way. Peck may be stretching Genesis a little, but he's certainly right that our spiritual laziness seen in our resistance to growth and change is a universal feature of our fallen condition.

He also makes the point that much of our fear is laziness — what we really fear is the *work* that we would have to do to adjust to a new reality or assimilate new information, the work that we would have to do if our relationships change or we

begin new ones. We love the status quo because it's *easier* for us than change. Haven't you at some time in your life been stuck in a bad relationship or a bad job or a bad apartment — because of that fearfulness which is rooted in laziness?

That is what Jesus is talking about in the realm of faith. Of course it is easier to play it safe with your faith than to risk it in investments, but God's judgment is that playing it safe is lazy. Of course it's easier to defend the Bible than to put it into action, but that is the path of the spiritually lazy. I know it's a lot of work to figure out what the gospel means in your office or your home — even what it means in the culture of New York City — but that is the work to which Christ calls us. Let us never be fooled into thinking that we are choosing the hard way when we choose the stubborn defense of the faith once delivered. The preachers who bury their faith portray themselves as martyrs more serious than the rest of us, but the truth — which has escaped them — is that they have chosen the lazy way of the status quo or the even easier way of nostalgia. The truly difficult thing is to put our faith to work in this city, to struggle to connect the Scriptures with the traumas of daily existence and the crises of global scale. In this way we give back to the master *more* than we were given. Because we have stretched and grown, the master says to us, "Well done, you good and faithful servant. Enter my joy."