

# Sermons at St Paul's

The Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

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Carroll Anne Sheppard; Licensed Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

## *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

So just how big is a talent? What are we talking about in today's gospel reading? From what I can gather with a little internet research, a talent was a weight, not a coin. It seems to have been about 70 pounds of gold. So the theoretical man who was going on a journey entrusted three of his slaves with millions of dollars to safeguard while he was gone. Hmmm.

This parable starts off with a scene that is hard to imagine. Is it about trust? This is a very trusting master. He is giving 350 pounds of gold to one slave, 140 pounds of gold to another slave and 70 pounds to the third – each “according to his ability.” Then he left. The first two promptly began trading and lending, and each doubled the weight of gold they held in trust. But the one who only had 70 pounds of gold decided to bury it for safekeeping.

Gold is a dense metal, and weighs a lot. In that era, when there were no banks or Federal Reserve, the gold would have been locked up in a storeroom, and these three slaves would have had to have other slaves to carry the weight of it. This particular slave might have managed to bury 70 pounds by himself in the dead of night. But, it turns out this was a really poor decision, and got him in big trouble when his master returned.

What is going on here? The master in this story certainly isn't rewarding prudence or conservative behavior. He sounds as though he has a trading empire. Perhaps he feels that gold which is not working to make more gold is wasted.

There have been many interpretations of this strange parable. Some have seen it as a sort of pun – that if we are not using our “talents” for God, we are squandering what God has given us. Other interpreters have pointed to the trust that the master shows, and pointed out that the

third slave was violating his master's trust by not using the gold to further his master's best interests. Does this parable have to do with trusting God?

Perhaps we should look to the passage from the prophet Zephaniah that we heard this morning. This might be an instance of complacency, which Zephaniah castigates and warns against. We could say that the third slave was complacent, and did nothing with the gold, sure that it would always be there. When the time came to return it to this hard-driving master, he would be able to hand it back, intact. He was taking no risks!

But you know there are always two sides to every story. What was going awry here was a mismatch of expectations. What is the prequel? Why didn't the master divide the gold into equal portions and share them out among his lead slaves? He had, apparently, already made decisions about the ability of each of these slaves' ability to manage his assets. So he divided his property "according to their ability" as he measured it – the ability to make more gold.

When his master returned, the first slave expected to be praised for his investing acumen, and he was. His master was extremely pleased. The second also expected praise, and he received some for his work. The third slave expected merely not to be punished, because he had not stolen the gold but could return it intact. Instead, he was thrown out of the household. The master expected him to do a poor job, but had given him one last chance. He blew it.

This certainly does not sound very "Christian." Does it? But it says a whole lot about human expectations. So much of the time, we are treated by people according to their expectations of us. So much of the time, we treat others based on our expectations. And sometimes, if those expectations are high, we – and they – live up to them.

What does God expect of us? What do we expect of God? We are approaching the days of Advent, when we will prepare ourselves for the celebration of Jesus' incarnation. What will Jesus be expecting of us? Perhaps he has trusted us to make a place in our hearts for him, whether rich or poor. We may have been in charge of many responsibilities or we may be responsible for only a few things. But regardless of the scope of our duties, if we have

performed them with care and prayer, we have created room in our hearts to welcome him. Or have we been like the third slave, expecting the return of the master with fear and resentment? “I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.”

If we have spent the last year in fear and resentment of God, hoarding what we have so that we are ready to exhibit it when Jesus comes asking if we have room for him, it will be a poor welcome indeed. We know as Christians that what God expects of us is our recognition that we are deeply loved and already forgiven. When we acknowledge God’s love, we are free to act in generosity and trust. We know that our good works will be welcome to God, who trusts us with stewardship of his creation. How many talents of gold is this beautiful earth and universe worth? How many talents of gold are the air and water, plants and animals, humans made in the image and likeness of God, really worth?

God trusts us to not only take care of them and each other, but also to help them become even more beautiful, whole and sound. When the moment comes, and we are returned to the master of creation, will we expect to say “Welcome home, master, see what I have done with your creation?” Or do we expect to tell God what a harsh and grasping master he has been, how we have been afraid and resentful while we have lived on earth?

Let’s close with the words of St. Paul from this morning’s Epistle, which are part of his message of encouragement to the people of Thessalonica.

“...God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep [when he comes] we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

*Amen.*