

November 13, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

A Parable of Responsibility and Accountability

Matthew 25:14-30

'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

These days I think we have to say at the outset that the parable of the talents in Matthew's gospel is NOT a story that can be used to justify investment capitalism and Wall Street. Parables are meant to shake up conventional thinking so that we start thinking in the ways of God, which are NOT compatible with Wall Street. The parable IS about taking what God has given us and making something of it to enrich life.

Jesus says, "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them..." "It" refers to the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. Parables are to open our insight, and to deepen our awareness of life in relation to God. The parables in Matthew 25 ask us to reflect on life in the ultimate and deepest sense, what matters most in the end. Matthew is writing a couple of generations after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Christian communities realize that the hoped-for return of the triumphant Christ is not going to happen any time soon. They are turning attention to how they are to live in the world as Jesus' followers. We see strong themes of spiritual alertness, images of being wide awake and living in the daylight, not the darkness of night. That is what the previous parable of the ten girls and their lamps seemed to be about. The spiritual life is bringing our own oil, being alert to our own relationship with God, being awake to life here and now, ready to perceive God's kingdom whenever and wherever it appears, and to be part of it, beginning with our own inner life. When we speak of the inward journey, I think that is what we mean--growing in spiritual alertness, in awareness of life in its relationship with God.

The parable of the talents is about the most meaningful way to live as followers and a community of Jesus. For us in the Church of the Covenant, this parable can be richly understood through the lens of what we call ultimate responsibility and accountability. We recognize and affirm the importance of each person taking ultimate responsibility for her or his life of faith in the inward and outward dimensions. The life of faith is about making a commitment to our own lives in relation to God. Along with that, it is important to find ways of being held accountable as we work with our spiritual lives. This is so that we stay on track and grow more deeply and fully

into a life of faith. Accountability gives us traction when it comes to the spiritual life. And without embracing full responsibility for our life and faith, we tend to look to someone else to do for us what we need to do for ourselves. Or, we find ourselves living vicariously through someone else's faith and experience instead of our own. Without ultimate responsibility and accountability, we drift through life, bouncing along the surface, not really claiming and living our own lives to their fullness.

A wealthy man is going on a journey. He entrusts his money to his servants. One gets five talents, another two, another one. A "talent" was a sum of money worth about fifteen years' wages of a laborer. So, even the servant who gets the one talent has an enormous sum. We should not feel sorry for him. To me, these huge sums of money represent the essential goodness and blessing of God. It is a statement that life is abundance, not scarcity, that we have everything we need to live fully as God's children. Why do some get more than others and what is the significance of it? The parable doesn't encourage us to waste our time pondering that. It is enough to say that every person is a beloved and cherished child of God who lavishes upon us each and all far more blessings and goodness than we are even aware of.

The man apportions the property according to abilities. Abilities vary. Not everyone is the same. The parable speaks of a simple reality of life as we observe it. Some have more abilities than others, but each has something to offer. The parable doesn't dwell on why this is so and it does not support a competitive view – I have more ability than you have! Life is not a contest. And the spiritual life is not about comparison and judgment.

Many of us are aware that there are those who seem far more capable than we ourselves are. We are quick to feel our own deficiencies and to measure ourselves against others. We do this in the religious community. We love to lift up the "saints," those who have lived extraordinary lives of sacrifice and so forth. I grew up in a minister's family, and we always had missionaries coming to visit the churches my father served. I would sit in our living room and listen to wondrous stories of compassion and healing in Africa or India or South America. I remember Dr. Victor C. Rambo, Jr.—how's that for a heroic missionary name!--for instance, who pioneered cataract surgery in India for fifty years. [You can Google Dr. Rambo at the Medical Mission Hall of Fame] He was one of those larger than life figures. Tall. Athletic. A powerful personality. He would have me and my friends out in our back yard doing calisthenics every time he could catch us. It would be hard for anyone not to feel a bit inferior in his presence.

The problem with lifting up some as extraordinary is that it can foster a tendency to measure ourselves against others. That is why I am not fond of talking about spiritual heroes. It is okay to be inspired by others' lives. However, it easily ends up being a distraction, causing us to

take our eyes off our own lives and gifts and callings, whatever they may be. The parable does not allow us to go there. There are different capabilities. Some may achieve “bigger” things than others. That’s just the way it is. But the parable and Jesus himself are not interested in spiritual hero-worship or competitiveness.

The point is to receive and embrace our own lives, who we are and what we have been given. If we do that faithfully, we will be surprised at how we will nourish life around us and how our own lives will become filled with deep joy. I think a big part of our spiritual, inward journey work is dropping the mental habits of comparison and self-measuring. The thing is to know who we are and what we have been entrusted with. There is no small thing. Big and small do not enter into it. We can always do more than we think we can do, and that will happen as we are faithful to the gifts with which we have been entrusted and to the particular calling that God has placed in our hearts. Faithfulness is ours; the results belong to God.

So, what do these servants do? The first two go out and invest it, doubling the master’s assets. When the master returns, they bring him his money and the interest. He responds: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into my joy.” They have taken a risk with what was entrusted to them. They could have lost the whole thing. But it seems that they did what the master hoped they would do—take what they had been entrusted with and try to make more with it.

This is a familiar theme with Jesus. The life of faith, of living as we were created by God to live, is about risk, opening ourselves up, enlarging our hearts stepping out in trust. The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is playing it safe, grasping onto security. The life of faith means questioning, searching, finding out for ourselves. It means being open, not closed. It means letting go, not grasping. Jesus said that those who hold onto their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for his sake and the gospel will find them. He told a little parable about how it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter God’s kingdom. The life of faith is about traveling light—dropping our opinions, our fears, our guilt, our regrets, our hurts--whatever keeps us from being open to God and to the life God created us to live.

The other thing is this: The servants are not really rewarded with anything but the joy of their master. What does he say? You have been faithful over a little; I will put you in charge of more. The reward of faithfulness is more faithfulness! There is a Jewish saying: The reward for keeping the Law is more keeping of the Law. Or we might put it this way: The reward for loving as God has loved us is more loving as God has loved us! Growing in our capacity to live by faith is its own reward. We don’t struggle to live a life of faith in order to gain something materially or

even spiritually. We do it in order to live the way we were made to live, to be who we were made to be. “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy.” That’s how Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it.

The third servant played it safe. He buried his portion in the ground so it would not be lost or stolen. He returned it to the master safe and sound. He did not lose it, but neither did he make anything with it. The master is indignant. “You wicked and lazy servant! You did this because you were afraid of what I would do if you lost my money.” The parable takes a harsh turn here. The one talent is taken away from that servant and given to the one who had the most. The order is given to cast the servant into darkness and eternal punishment. It is a mistake to identify the master with God, which raises all sorts of problems for us about the kind of God who would fall into such a rant. It is good to remember that Jesus tells the parable to deepen our understanding of the kingdom of God. Remember, it is the whole story that tells us of God’s kingdom, not the individual parts by themselves. Jesus is teaching a deep spiritual reality here. When we approach life conservatively, fearfully, always taking the most secure route, never risking anything, grasping our life tightly for fear of losing it—what happens? We suffocate. Life shrinks. We end up losing instead of gaining. I think that the third servant allowed his fear to dictate his life. I think that the other two probably had the same fear, but they embraced it without letting it determine how they would live. It is not about never having fear, not being afraid that we might fail or mess up or whatever. It is about being afraid but living open-handedly and open-heartedly anyway! It is about growing in our capacity to be at home with uncertainty, with risk, with openness and generosity of spirit. It is about finding out for ourselves what the life of faith is about, by our experience and not by someone just telling us about it.

I think this is why Jesus taught that children are closer to God’s kingdom than we are. They are completely open and fearless. Young children still have a sense of the connectedness of life and trust it. Not that they don’t feel fear. They do. It’s just that they don’t let fear dominate their lives until we adults teach them to do that. Many years ago, I worked at Boston Children’s Hospital Medical Center as an orderly on the cardiac surgery and medical division, fulfilling my obligation as a conscientious objector. I saw daily the courage of children facing things that would stop me cold in my tracks. It was not that they weren’t afraid of needles or tests or surgery, or even dying; it’s just that they did not let their fear dominate their lives. They were able to face what they had to face with open spirits and hearts.

One last thought. Sometimes Jesus’ parables have these harsh endings. Being thrown into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. We like nicer endings. We prefer a spirituality that is, you know, kind of warm and cozy. The most profound spiritual

traditions know that there are some spiritual realities that are so crucial to our lives that they need to be said in as strong a way as possible. These extreme ways of teaching are so that we really pay attention to what is most important, so that we do not miss the life God created us to live because we are distracted by so many lesser things.

Every one of us has abundance of life. Whatever our abilities, we each can claim the life God gave us and do something with it. We can live fearlessly, even though we have fears. We can live generously, regardless of how much or little we think we have. We can enter into and share God's own joy as we live these lives God gave us to live.