

Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost
I Thessalonians 5:1-11, Psalm 123, Matthew 25:14-30
David Teschner
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I spent two days last week at our annual clergy conference at Camp Chanco. We had a very interesting presenter, a former scientist turned priest, who kept us keenly attentive and entertained during the course of three long lectures. He did this with a creative multi-media presentation, good humor and material that was relevant to our peculiar vocation.

In one segment he talked about multitasking versus being focused on one task at a time. Putting on his scientist hat, he said that young people are better at multitasking, but our brains are designed for focusing. He said multitasking is not only counterproductive and doesn't save us time, but it's not good for our brains.

He further talked about our society's addiction to being productive and busy. He strongly recommended we practice the old Biblical commandment to keep the Sabbath Day holy, refraining from business as usual.

He referred to a book by an Old Testament scholar whose premise was that Biblical Egypt was a "culture of production." Remember the savage brick making the Hebrew slaves had to do? Once liberated, in the wilderness, the new God told the people to take a day of rest with no "production." Their new God was not a workaholic, nor a cruel task master.

All the while our guest was talking, I was thinking about today's parable. On the surface at least, it's about increasing wealth (A talent was a huge sum of money in Jesus' day.) and being wildly productive. The good slaves double their master's holdings while the bad slave merely preserves the original investment.

The Bible can be confusing: On the one hand, Jesus warns us on multiple occasions of the dangers of accumulating excessive amounts of wealth, and then he tells a story about a very wealthy man who commends his servants for further increasing his wealth.

So maybe the parable has nothing to do with wealth and putting money to work to grow more money. Perhaps it has everything to do with pleasing the one we consider master of our life and using the raw material of our unique selves to advance that master's agenda and goals. Just as the three slaves received their valuable commodities from the generosity of the master, we too have all received valuable assets from our creator.

A renowned Rabbi named Zusya once said, "When I get to heaven, I won't be asked, 'Why were you not Moses?' but 'Why were you not Zusya?'" As the parable makes clear, we do not all have the same aptitudes, personalities or proficiencies. Each of us is one of a kind and specially made by God and our parents.

William Sloane Coffin, a popular clergyman in the 20th century, once said, “As Christians, we don’t need to prove ourselves; we just need to express ourselves.” We don’t need to prove we are valuable. We are valuable because God loves us. That love is shown to us in many ways and also in the gift of Jesus, our greatest asset – our five, two and one talents.

God’s agenda, his commandment for us, is to extend that love to others by simply expressing ourselves. That doesn’t sound too hard.

The problem the third slave had in our parable today was that he didn’t accept his one talent as from a generous master. His response was fear rather than joy and gratitude. It’s nearly impossible to be generous when we are afraid.

One question I always ask of this parable is what if one of the slaves had tried to increase the value of the treasure entrusted to him, and he either lost some of it or perhaps all of it. What would the master have done then?

I think the master would still have commended him for at least having tried.

The story is told of an employee who one day lost \$25,000 of his boss’s money on a bad investment. When the boss called him into his office, the man immediately blurted out, “I know, I’m fired.” Much to his surprise, the boss said, “Heaven’s no, not after I just spent \$25,000 on your education!”

Like that of this wise boss, God’s economy is not dependent on success or failure, but whether we are trying. Do we want to please and serve the master any way we can?

Brother Lawrence became well known because he washed dishes in his monastery as best he could with great joy to the glory of God. He washed dishes. He expressed himself in a very mundane way. The particular activity is not as important as the attitude we bring to it. I’ve heard it said we prove our true faithfulness by the way we do things when no one is looking.

I believe that we in this church have gotten the message about serving the master. We go about our business pretty aware of who we are supposed to please. This morning God wants to say to us, “Well done, good and trustworthy servant.” Tomorrow we will go back into the world that isn’t always supportive and affirming of the highest principles, with people who can be difficult. We will continue our various activities knowing God is pleased and appreciative of what we are trying to do to make God’s world a better, safer and more caring place.

I want to conclude with a shortened version of a story, familiar to some, written for children, but it’s an adult book for sure. It’s The Giving Tree by Shel Silverstein. It’s a modern day parable that I’m sure makes Jesus smile every time he hears it. Listen and see if you don’t think it amplifies today’s parable from Matthew.

It begins,

“Once there was a tree and she loved a little boy.” The boy came every day and climbed and played in the branches, ate her apples and rested in her shade. The boy loved the tree and the tree was happy.

As the boy got older, he didn’t come to play in the tree, and the tree was lonely. When he did come back, the tree was happy and wanted him to climb and play like he used to, but the boy said he didn’t want to play. He wanted to buy things and have fun with them. He needed money.

The tree didn’t have money, but she said, “Take my apples and sell them for money.” So the boy did and the tree was happy.

The boy was gone for a long time again and the tree was sad until one day the boy came back. The tree shook with joy and invited the boy to climb and play once more. The boy said he was too busy for that. Now he wanted a house and a family. The tree said the boy could cut off his branches to build a house. The boy did and the tree was happy.

The boy stayed away even longer this time and the tree was again sad until he returned, much older now. Climb and play said the tree, but the boy said he was too old to play. He said he wanted a boat so he could sail far away from there.

“Cut down my trunk,” said the tree. “Then you can build a boat to go away and be happy.” The boy did and the tree was happy, but not really.

And after a long, long time, the boy came back again. The tree apologized for having nothing left to give. She was just an old stump. The boy said he didn’t need much now; he too was pretty old. He said he just needed a quiet place to sit and rest. He was tired.

When the tree heard that she straightened herself up as best she could and said a stump is a good place for sitting and resting. The boy did and the tree was happy.

Regardless of our status or stage in life, we can be the giving tree. God will be happy and so will we.
AMEN.