

Dorothy Sanders Wells recounts the story of Frederick Douglass,

“...who was born into slavery around 1817, and he realized as a young child that there must be something quite important about being able to read and write. After he was sold to a family in Baltimore, his slaveowner’s wife, Sophia Auld, taught the young Douglass the alphabet and a few simple words.

But when Hugh Auld—the master and Sophia’s husband—found her teaching Douglass, he chastised her, telling her that education would make for a discontented slave. Douglass reasoned from Hugh’s insistence that he not be taught to read and write that education must be a valuable means to freedom, and he worked diligently to teach himself those tools that were not otherwise available to him.”

Sophia's act might have seemed rather small—teaching someone the alphabet, a few words. I’d guess that she herself probably didn’t think much of these abilities, or think of them as a resource, or a value, or a *talent* that she could share. She just helped out someone who needed help.

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Talents are at the center of Matthew’s gospel this morning.

This story picks up right where we left off last week,

with Jesus teaching his followers about waiting about how to wait in light of God’s future.

This parable deals with the same question of how people ought to actively wait for the coming of the Lord, but does so in greater detail.

“Whereas the parable of the bridesmaids emphasizes the need to be prepared for Christ’s return, this parable points to both *what God expects of us* and hints at the *blessings* that can come from our active waiting.”¹

Jesus tells a parable of three slaves each who have been entrusted with the master’s wealth. They were given a “talent” or “talents.”

A word about the word “talent.” A talent was a weight or measure. It’s not hard to see where we get our English word talent, because the Greek word here is *talanton*. What began as a term of measure in Greek morphed over centuries, through Latin to the very word we use today to denote a “special

¹ Chelsea Harmon

ability or skill.” No doubt, this happened because of the *value* of having a talent. And so, Our English word “talent” comes from this verse.

But here, a talent was simply, a measure. And it measured A LOT.

A talent is equal to about 6,000 denarii. One denarius is a common laborer’s daily wage, a talent would be roughly equivalent to 20 years’ wages for the average worker.

Five talents, the largest amount entrusted to any of the servants, would be about 100 years’ worth of labor. Do the math, on ~\$65,000 (average salary in MN), and

the first slave receives, \$6.5 M,
the second \$2.6M,
and the last \$1.3 M. Not bad for any of them!

The slaveowner gives no indication of what they are to do, just take care of the crazy sums of money.

Two double their money. One digs a hole.

Two are praised, and one is cursed and sent into outer darkness.

For to all those who have, more will be given, . . .

but from those who have nothing,
even what they have will be taken away.

Ouch. What are we to make of this parable?

Now there are a lot of things this parable is NOT:

Not an **allegory**. If it was, the landowner would be God,

but this landowner is anything but like God as he Himself proclaims:

“You knew. . .that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?” So it’s not really about God gifting people’s abilities.

Not an endorsement of **capitalism**. This 1st c. text doesn’t endorse an economic system that emerged many centuries later.

It’s not the Bible telling us to be **wise investors** of our money. The Bible is not E.F. Hutton. We don’t listen to it for investment strategies.

It’s not the **prosperity gospel**. NT Professor Carla Works describes this well:

“Contrary to what might be modeled by some best-selling televangelists, the parable does not justify a gospel of economic prosperity. Instead, it challenges believers to emulate their Master by using all that God has given them *for the sake of the kingdom*.”

And I think that’s it. . . the treasure is work for the kingdom,
the treasure is your **work** for the kingdom,
the treasure is your **voice** for the kingdom.

the treasure is the reign of God,

So don't bury this incredible,
amazing,
larger-than-anyone-could-conceive-of wealth
that's been entrusted to each of us.

* * *

So what does that look like? I've followed Matthew and Luke in the past 2 years. And pretty consistently encouraged the use of our talents for the work of the kingdom, that is: care for the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the sojourner. The least, the least, the left out.

*If you have any doubt, listen to Orval next week when he will be preaching the quintessential text from Matthew 25:
when did we see you hungry, naked, thirsty sick or in prison. . . ?*

So, with lots of instruction on using our talents,
let's focus on what it might mean to "bury" the treasure of the reign of God.

In our nation today, there is no shortage of division, condemnation, anger, prejudice, and hatred. Hatred sometimes gives way to violence, sometimes it gives way to murder.

What history has shown is that
Not all prejudice turns into hatred, but some does.
Not all hatred turns into violent hatred, but some does.
And not all violent hatred turns into murderous hatred. But some does.

It's not terribly hard to condemn murderous hatred.

For example, the slaughter happening in Gaza right now. Some victims are soldiers, some are terrorists, and many more are innocent civilians enduring unimaginable terror, suffering, injury and death.

We condemn the killing of a 6-year-old Palestinian-American boy in Chicago for being Muslim.

The crime – and the level of hatred to commit the crime – are unimaginable. Any sane person would condemn this, and speak out against it.

Violent hatred is also not terribly hard to speak out against. This past week, a senator challenged a national leader to a fistfight. On the floor of the senate chambers.

"Let's settle this right now. Stand your butt up."

"You stand your butt up!"

Eventually, cooler heads prevailed, and violence was avoided.

Deitrich Bonhoeffer said, “The sin of respectable people is running away from responsibility”

Let me suggest maybe it’s our responsibility *to speak out* against prejudice, against bigotry, against violence, against hate.

We will be gathering for the holidays soon. We might encounter friends and relatives, who express, bigotry, prejudice, and hatred toward other people.

Here is my working hypothesis, I could be wrong, but, if we don’t say anything, we bury the treasure that is the inclusive, loving, caring kingdom of God.

We bury our treasure anytime we fail to speak up
on behalf of the poor,
the marginalized,
and the oppressed.

You likely know the famous post-world War II poem by theologian and Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller critiquing Nazi atrocities:

In Germany, they came first for the Communists,
And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist;
And then they came for the trade unionists,
And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist;
And then they came for the Jews,
And I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew;
And then . . . they came for me . . .
And by that time there was no one left to speak up.

And you can be sure that a silence that betrays God’s Kingdom is not just a mid-20th c. occurrence.

Hear this truth from author Caleb Roehrig,

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret I’ve learned from being old and gay. Being nice to abusers are those who [are part of] an abusive power structure does not teach them you deserve humane treatment: it teaches them that you find the abuse reasonable.”

“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing,” (*a Quote typically but probably inaccurately Attributed to Edmund Burke*)

I know it’s hard to speak up. You risk the relationship. But what kind of relationship do you have with someone if you just keep your mouth shut to keep the peace? If

they can share their bigotry, racism, and hate, why can't you share your concern for peace and justice for the oppressed and marginalized?

A friend of mine. You know him too. . . was doing business with someone who said some incredibly racist and derogatory things about an ethnic group here on the East Side. When he heard this, he said to the person, "Whatever you have to say to them, you say to me, because they're my friends."

He chose NOT to bury his treasure. He took the risk. He put himself in the equation, on behalf of the one outside the power structure. That wasn't easy.

It wasn't easy for Sophia Auld to take a risk and NOT bury her treasure. She helped educate Frederick Douglass, a slave. She got in trouble with society and her husband. But she helped the kingdom flourish.

Douglass himself then, did not bury his talent and gained the respect of noted abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison and, later, Abraham Lincoln, who gave Douglass an audience to share his story and his plea for enslaved people to be set free.

Seeds planted by Sophia Auld led to his reading, writing, and speaking to try to secure the freedom and well-being of others—bringing about justice for God's people and helping to bring about the kingdom.

And of course, practically speaking, the question remains, WHAT do you say? Again, I'm no expert, wish I knew more, but maybe you can observe their attitude and say, "Wow, that sounds racist, or hateful, or vengeful." Or maybe you ask them why they want to discriminate against such and such a people group, or why they are so angry and full of hostility?

I'm not sure. But, like the slave with two talents, and the slave with five talents, they gave it a shot
and didn't just bury the kingdom treasure.

So what will you do with the enormous talent, the enormous task that you have been given? The incredible privilege to do the very work of God in the world? Work of healing, doing justice, peacemaking, and loving your neighbor
And loving your enemy?

May we go this week,
Not burying the treasure of the kingdom,
Taking a risk,
Speaking against hate and prejudice,
Doing the work that God plainly calls us to do,
Knowing that Jesus is present with us.
Thanks be to God.