

Sunday, August 9, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 25:14–30](#)

TITLE: Sound Investments

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

The passage that I just read is a familiar one. At one time or another, most of us have heard, read, or possibly been compared to or characterized as the good and trusty servants or the wicked and lazy one. Now, before we go any further, we must deal with the terminology employed by the Gospel writer. In our American experience, the term slave connotes and denotes one of the darkest periods in the history of this country.

From the time that enslaved Africans arrived on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 to the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, and even today in some individuals' opinions, people of African descent were and are sub-human, nothing more than chattel, property, a commodity. Yet, it was upon the backs, sweat, tears and lives of enslaved people that this country was built, that generational wealth was established and secured for the "have got's." The negative reverberations and consequences of slavery still exist today. Slavery was and is evil.

Black and brown people in this country are still disproportionately poor, under- and uneducated, work in essential and sometimes expendable jobs, live in substandard housing, suffer greater health disparities, have reduced access to affordable healthcare, and people of African descent carry the mental, emotional, physical and biological scars and damage of slavery in their very bodies to this day. Slavery was and is evil.

Therefore, to our sensibilities and based on our limited knowledge about the evils of slavery in this country; I say limited knowledge, because they don't teach the truth about slavery in our history books; the use of the term slave is offensive, hurtful, and may cause some of us to close our ears and disregard the message the Gospel writer is conveying in Jesus' Parable of the Talents.

Although the bible was often used to justify chattel slavery in America, biblically the term slave, servant, or *doulos* in Greek, can connote voluntary or involuntary servitude, someone who is devoted to another without regard for their own interests, or a subjected bondsman. In antiquity, slavery was a common practice in prominent Jewish household and for the most part, slaves or servants were treated as valued and trusted members of the family.

In today's allegorical passage, the master or man of means obviously trusted and valued his servants. As he prepares to leave on an extended journey, he summons the three and entrusts to them large sums of money. Previously, in a sermon preached by Pastor Randy, he explained that a talent was not pocket change. A talent was a large sum of money. One commentator states "one talent was equivalent to the earnings of a laborer for fifteen to twenty years. The immensity of the sum is intended to remind us of the preciousness of the gifts that God has entrusted to our care." (Douglas R.A. Hare,

Interpretation, A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Matthew, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, 286)

Usually, when this passage is preached, the focus is on the good and faithful servants, both of whom double the talents given to them. We are advised that to be found faithful, we must wisely use or invest everything that God has entrusted to us. And that is true. How we invest our time, our money, our energy, our attention, and our gifts are important—but even more important is in whom we invest our time, money, energy, attention, and gifts.

It is one thing to invest to benefit ourselves or those in our immediate circle. It is something altogether different and noble to invest in a child who needs encouragement or a laptop to be able to learn remotely during this pandemic season; or to invest in a person or family working their way out of income insufficiency, or whose work responsibilities don't lend themselves to working remotely; or to invest in a person returning to the community after incarceration. It is self-less to invest in the senior down the street by cutting their grass or shopping for their groceries; or to invest in another's health by wearing a mask, staying home and not attending a super-spreader event, or when you are ill. It's a dutiful to invest in the future of this country by encouraging others to complete the census, register to vote and vote by mail, and to let returning citizens know that they absolutely have the right to vote as well. Jesus says, invest in the least of these, for just as we do unto them, we have done it unto him.

In today's passage, the two servants who doubled the return of the talents entrusted to them are told that they have been trustworthy, faithful over a few things and as a result, they are put in charge of many things and summoned to enter into their master's joy. But what of the servant who buries the master's talent?

Now, the parable states up front, that the master gave to each of the servants according to their ability. He gave the third servant only one talent, which was still a large sum of money. The master knew this servant had limited ability, yet he still gave him something to work with. We all have different abilities and opportunities, primarily because in this country the "have got's" got theirs on the broken bodies and spirits and the endless and thankless work of the "have not's."

Disproportionately, people of color in this country do not have generational wealth, property equity that is passed down from generation to generation, equal education or are priced out of advanced educational opportunities, and usually are the last hired and the first fired. Some of us are set up to fail from the beginning based on our residential zip code or the color of our skin. And some people of color, who have had the opportunity to advance educationally, financially, or socially do not go or reach back into the "hood" from which we came and encourage, much less help someone else advance. The writer of the Gospel of Luke tells us that "to whom much is given, much will be required" (Lk 12:48) and that applies to everyone regardless of our address, racial or gender identity, social standing, talents or finances.

The unfaithful servant's defense for burying his talent was fear. He stated, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I hid your talent in the ground." Fear is a terribly strong emotion that keeps many people from moving from where they are comfortable into uncomfortable and unfamiliar spaces. This truth applies to people from all walks of life. Fear keeps people with the means, time, and gifts from driving into a community to mentor a child or family, as well as it keeps people who are income insufficient from taking a chance on a new opportunity.

Fear is paralyzing and can cause us to seek security and preservation rather than to serve. Fear can cause us to be ungrateful or disrespectful and hoard or bury all that has been entrusted to us. Knowledge and fear could have caused the master to withhold from the slave with limited ability, and not give him even the one talent. But instead, the master gave, overcoming his fear of not reaping a harvest and investing in the third slave as well and much like a loving parent, the master was disappointed when the servant did not live up to his potential.

Ironically, the master did not tell any of the slaves or servants how or what to do with the talents he entrusted to them. We only know that he gave to each of them according to their abilities or gifts and then he went away for a period of time. What we do know is that the master invested in his people. Likewise, we are not told what the good and faithful servants invested in to double their principles. All we know is that two of the servants doubled what was given to them, while the other buried the one talent he was given. But if I were to use my sanctified imagination, I believe the faithful servants invested in the people who were under their care, following the example of their master. For investing in people pays dividends far beyond what we might see or recognize.

As faithful and trustworthy people of God, we are not here to strive for theological correctness, passively waiting or adhering to strict obedience to liturgical seasons or constructs or historical examples or experiences. We are to act responsibly and responsively, take the initiative and yes, sometimes take risks that pay dividends beyond the rise and fall of the stock market or what is recorded on our individual or corporate profit and loss statements, or balance sheets.

Siblings in Christ, God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, of love and a sound mind (1 Tim. 1:7). Christ did not allow his fear of crucifixion and the cross to keep him from going to Calvary. But instead, he allowed himself to be crucified and resurrected from the dead by God, and his investment in our future reaped our redemption from death and ensured our inheritance of eternal life. His sacrifice may not have seemed a wise investment, but it was insured by the God in whom we move and breath and have our being, and who assures us that love, and peace, and hope, and grace, and faith in God and one another never fail and are always sound investments.

Amen