

Perhaps more than any other time, I am tempted to try to preach a genuine, come-to-Jesus sermon based on this parable: a finger-pointing, pulpit-pounding, Bible-thumping, altar-calling, get-your-life-right kind of sermon. I've never preached one of those, and I'm really interested to know if I can do it. That kind of homiletics would really focus on this third servant with the one talent, and what he does with it, and then the master's harsh rebuke of him. But most likely the sermon will not head that direction, after all- I'm sorry if that disappoints you. Maybe some other time.

This third servant is a bit like a character from a comic strip I cut out and saved many years ago. It is in some drawer or notebook somewhere. The character is called into the boss's office at work, and stands before her desk as she says, "I've been going over your file and see that you were hired 23 years ago to take care of the president's dog." "Yes, ma'am, that's right." "Well, I found in here that the dog died eleven years ago." "Yes, ma'am." And then, a long pause, one frame of the comic strip where the boss and our character look at one another without expression, and then the man says, "What would you like me to do now?" In some ways you've got to respect a person who never gets in a hurry.

Actually, I can't decide if the comic strip guy is like or unlike the third servant. The character in the comic is so obviously lazy, but the only reason we may think the servant is lazy, is because his master calls him lazy. Really what he does, hiding the money in the ground, seems to be a good idea. The teaching of the rabbis said that a person who buried a treasure was not liable for its loss, so it looks like he had taken the safest measures not to lose the master's money. We know he is afraid, and he is probably more afraid when he sees what the first and second servants accomplish with their funds, but I'm guessing he is terrified when the master grows angry and says, "Wicked! Slothful! Throw this worthless slave into the realm of deepest darkness!" At that point it is too late now for him to ask, "What else would you like me to do?"

We should go over a couple of things about this passage before we decide exactly what it tells us to do. 1) First, there is a master, about to go away; we may want to think about Jesus who went away, promising to return soon, but hasn't for a long, long time: how are we supposed to act in the meantime? 2) And these three servants are not simply employees, but slaves: the master can do whatever he wants with them, whether it is destroying them if their work displeases him, or inviting them to the dining table if their labor has pleased him. Perhaps that is

what is meant by the phrase, “enter into the joy of your master”; as some scholars have written, these faithful slaves are welcomed to the Messianic feast, where they receive full partnership in God’s kingdom. 3) We should realize that this parable is not addressed to the crowd, or the religious leaders, but to Jesus’ followers, and so we should think that these three would be the master’s most highly regarded slaves. And he expects good results from them. But don’t think this is just a test to see how well they do- and this isn’t Monopoly money. He gives them 5 and 2 and 1 talents. A talent is a unit of weight, and there are different ideas about what it was worth, something like \$1,000, or as much as fifteen years of a working man’s wages, or even 20 years. This is a lot of money. 4) We should remember that a talent is money, but may also be a symbol for the gifts God gives.

The point that some might want to make is that the master is a hard man, and use that as an evangelistic tool, emphasizing the justifiable fear of the third slave. So, a theology based upon fear would say that when the master returns- or when Jesus comes back to judge the quick and the dead, it is too late to ask, “What do you want me to do now?” So, you had better get it right today! Better get your life right today! I would prefer to go about it in a little different manner than shouting and emphasizing fear.

I want to take the statement of the third slave at face value, that he really meant what he said, and not that he was merely trying to excuse his failings. Rather, he thought he was in the right, preserving the master's money, and not putting it at risk. But don't you think that the other two slaves were also afraid? So what's the difference? What makes one bury the gift of the master, and the others, work and try to increase it? Maybe it's in the comparison with the third slave that we can understand the first two slaves. If they were all afraid, then there was something greater than fear which impelled them to dare to trade and invest and create more wealth for the master. And it must have been this: that they wanted to please the master. What would have happened if they had lost the money with bad investments? Would they have been cast into outer darkness like the third slave? Perhaps, but their anticipation of the master's praise made the risk worthwhile to them, and made their hard work worthwhile. The third slave never took the risk, so he is called wicked for never trying to improve the master's gift; never worked beyond digging a hole, so he is called lazy, and then, condemned.

Does this mean then, that God intends for us to use his gifts, even at a risk to ourselves, rather than for us to be secure or content? Oh, most certainly. We must get past our own fear, or inertia, and do the work that develops these gifts. The

most important thing is to seek the joy of the Master. Fear overpowered the third slave and he didn't even try. *Timidity tells God that we do not trust him.* So, which will it be for us, faith or fear? God wants bold men and women, and boys and girls, servants who will trust their Master to be gracious.

A faithful servant must know the Master better than just to be afraid. All of us experience fear, fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of pain. But giving joy to the Master must overcome our fear. It is God's perfect joy that our Master will share with good and faithful servants. Do you remember the movie, "Chariots of Fire" and one of the heroes of the film, Eric Liddell, the Flying Scotsman, a missionary and son of a Presbyterian minister, who won the 400 meters in the 1924 Olympics? In the film at the climactic moment as he begins the sprint around the final turn, chasing down the best runners in the world, we hear his voice coming over the music, "I know God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run, I can feel his pleasure."

What is important to us in our relationship with God? Isn't it to be so intimate with him that we experience his pleasure; to delight in him and to know that he delights in our faithfulness? These two good and faithful slaves are not just made happy for a time by doing good things for the master, they share his joy.

They were given the greatest gift- such closeness to the master that they could “feel his pleasure.” Perhaps this parable tells us that we must not be afraid for the wrong reason: not afraid to make mistakes, or to think wrongly sometimes; but let us be afraid that we may not give joy to our Master, and receive it in return.

Here is a little bit of a different call to discipleship. You may have heard some talk the past few weeks, about the need for kitchen repairs here at church. Redoing the floor in there is a necessity; and some have proposed that while we are at it, we should make the kitchen more workable with larger sinks, and a better stove, more shelving and storage. The elders discussed this for a long time yesterday, and decided we should do the extra remodeling and decided to send it as a proposal to the Board for approval. So, that process will be happening in the next few weeks, and during that period, you will all be given the opportunity to contribute to this project. We will have the plans posted for all to see, and we will ask everyone to help in this work.

We see this as a vital work in the life of our church. We talked yesterday about what we are at First Christian, and what we do best, what is our talent, our

special gift from God. And we think it is our hospitality: the fellowship and love and joy that we share, the spirit here that welcomes all in the name of Jesus Christ. And the kitchen is the at heart of that hospitality. Think of our pot-lucks and the Luncheons on the Square. So, here is the call to discipleship: pray how you can help, and let us work together, so that we may develop the good gifts of God in our ministry to this community, and give him cause to delight in our faithfulness. Rather than hiding our talent, let us bring it out and use it to give glory to God.