

*“Making It Count”*

*Matthew 25.14–30*

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**A man goes on a long journey, leaving behind him a cadre of folks he hoped would invest his assets wisely. Do you know what it's like to come home from a three-month sabbatical and find this text waiting for you?!**

**Actually, it's perfect! In their wisdom, the folks who created the lectionary plop this text into the season of harvest here in the northern hemisphere, which in many congregations coincides happily with stewardship season. And so when you hear someone pick this text apart, you can usually be fairly certain that they are going to “go financial on you”... that somehow the return on investment from these silver talents will be reflected in the church budget. Well, I'm not going there today. (That said, if you pledge for 2018 isn't in yet, I know that you can lower the blood pressure of fellow members on the Budget & Finance Committee by pledging today!)**

**You know, I don't think that Jesus' hearers would typically be the kind of folk who would be in the position of financial managers who are entrusted by a master to expand his wealth. So, if it isn't about money and a solid return on investment, what it is about? I wonder if it is something far more valuable, far more elemental than silver. I am going to hazard a guess that this parable of Jesus is about us.**

**I know you've heard a few parables this fall, and it is important to remember the function of a parable, which is to make us stop and think differently about a situation, to puzzle with it, to wrestle with it, to go deeper.**

**What if the wealth that is invested with us is not our money, but ourselves...our deepest selves...the very life that has been given and entrusted to us by God? Stop for just a minute and think about that: each one of us, the old and young, the foolish and wise, the rich and poor...all of us have been given one life to live out fully. As Jesus says, “I came that you may have life, and have it in abundance.”<sup>1</sup> That's the greatest gift for each of us: abundant living. Whether our lives are long or short they can be lived in abundance in each moment.**

**So if you use that framework, think for a moment about the master going on a long journey and entrusting you with your life. Our cultural framework is based on radical individualism and the notion that “it's my life to live however I want.” And I might quibble with the theology behind that. What if we saw our lives as a gift from God entrusted to us, not simply for our own satisfaction and enjoyment, but also an investment in God's kingdom? We only get one life, so we need to **make it count**.**

**Each of us has gifts within us; some of them are obvious and some of them are quite well hidden. And sometimes we aren't even aware of them, because we have quashed our talents and not given ourselves permission to live our lives in full abundance.**

**I was reading a book last week by Elizabeth Gilbert, about unleashing creativity, called *The Big Magic*, and it had all kinds of resonances with this parable: “Do you have**

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<sup>1</sup> John 10.10

the **courage** to bring forth the treasures that are hidden within you?” she asks. “Look, I don’t know what’s hidden within you. I have no way of knowing such a thing. You yourself may barely know, although I suspect you’ve caught glimpses. I don’t know your capacities, your aspirations, your longings, your secret talents. But surely something wonderful is sheltered inside you. I say this with all confidence, because I happen to believe we are all walking repositories of buried treasure. I believe this is one of the oldest and most generous tricks the universe [aka God] plays on us human beings, both for its own amusement and for ours; The universe buries strange jewels deep within us all, and then stands back to see if we can find them.”<sup>2</sup>

I’m going to invite you to pull out your bulletin or a piece of paper and jot down some of your own thoughts about your deepest longings and your gifts. What are some of those jewels that are **still buried** deep within you? What are some of the yet-unlived dreams, the yet-undeveloped talents, the yet-unwritten stories that are waiting within you to be mined? Make a note or two for yourself. Bring that into your prayers this week and see how you might go on a treasure hunt that will yield jewels not just for you, but for God and God’s realm.

Irenaeus of Lyon, a second-century bishop wrote that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive.” Have you experienced being with someone who is fully alive? Who has grasped living life with abundance? Who is uncovering and mining the jewels, the gifts, within themselves and sharing that giftedness with the world? We talk about people as being charismatic, and that literally means those who possess a gift. But it’s more than having a nice smile and an engaging personality: it’s being authentically who God created us to be and using our God-given talents.

So, if we all have gifts, why aren’t we using them? What are the obstacles that are getting in the way of us becoming “human beings fully alive?”

Let’s go back to the parable for a moment. Two of the three slaves understand that their master wanted them to unpack their gifts and increase what he had entrusted two them. They don’t spend any time making excuses...they just report how they doubled what had been entrusted to them. The third slave, who buried his treasure and kept it hidden, said, “Master, I knew you were a harsh man” as he tries to explain why he had not increased what he had been given. What kept the last slave from expanding what was entrusted to him was **fear**.

How many lives could be infinitely more rich if we could help one another move beyond our fear? I’m not talking about sensible fear of things like rattlesnakes and bungee jumping. I’m talking about the chorus of little negative voices within us that beat the constant refrain: “You’re not good enough.” “You’re not old enough.” “You’re not young enough.” “You’re not smart enough.” “You’re not faithful enough.” “You’re not beautiful enough.” “You don’t have time.”

All of us have at times sense those negative voices and the kind of fear that paralyzes us from becoming fully alive and uncovering the talents that lay buried deep within us. And it’s time to acknowledge that we have those fears and say “enough” and put them on the sidelines.

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Gilbert, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. (NY: Riverhead, 2016), p. 8.

What we need to overcome those fear-laden voices is **courage**. You may never have thought about yourself as courageous or brave...because you experience fear. But without fear, there is no opportunity to live into courage. Courage is all about doing something scary, stepping out into the risk-zone.

I know that churches in general hate taking risks. But if you look at what we have done at Plymouth, you'll see the highpoints of our history all involve risk-taking: starting an immigrant church, moving from Old Town to Prospect Road, calling LGBT clergy in the 1990s, voting to become Open and Affirming, expanding and improving our building, standing up for undocumented immigrants.

Courage is about acknowledging the fear and then moving forward with faith. Sometimes we forget that we are not doing this alone and that **God has our back**.

I also want to challenge you all to look within yourselves and see if some of your giftedness is in helping this particular outpost of the kingdom of God reach its mission by saying yes to serving as a lay leader, as a member of one of our boards or the leadership council. It takes courage to lead, and we want to help develop new leaders within this congregation, so if you have an inkling and want to talk more, I'm available!

When I was in St. Gallen, Switzerland, in September, I stayed in an AirBnb with four young guys, and they invited me to have dinner with their friends, and they asked what our congregation was like, and when I told them about being ONA, doing work around immigration reform, and homelessness prevention, they said, "Oh, our government does all that for us." Well, our government isn't doing that, so we need to step up with courage.

Incredibly gifted people comprise Plymouth...together, we have the capacity to expand the talents that have been entrusted to us. We need each one of our members to look within themselves prayerfully and ask what talents they have to contribute to God's realm. We need to step up with courage, with conviction, and with faith to do become the fully-alive congregation that God intends us to be.

I close today with the words of Marianne Williamson, which you may have heard Nelson Mandela offer at his inauguration:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?' Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."<sup>3</sup>

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love*. (SF: HarperOne, 1996).