

**THE OLD MEETING HOUSE  
EAST MONTPELIER CENTER, VT**

**November 13, 2011**

**“Schrodinger’s Jump”  
Preached by the Rev. Elissa Johnk**

**Deuteronomy 30: 19-20**

<sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,<sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

**Gospel Reading      Matthew 25:14-30**

So this morning’s scripture passage deserves a little explanation. There are two very prevalent, equally likely theories as to what it means. The problem is, those theories are, in many ways, opposites.

It falls third in a series of 4 short vignettes about the apocalypse – or end times in the Gospel of Matthew. Now, there are two things to know about Matthew. One: it is very concerned with explaining why the end of times has not yet happened, and telling his people what to do while they wait. Two: Matthew was the disciple reported to be a tax collector – or a social outcast, because his job relied on taking money and giving it to the Roman Empire. This particular parable is called the parable of the talents, and a talent, in Jesus’ day was a ton of money – literally. It was a heavy, big, brick of money, roughly 75 lbs, and equivalent to 15 years’ wages for a day labor. It is often thought that we derive the modern English word “talent” from this very parable.

Each of the two prevailing theories on this text has a different interpretation about Jesus’ thoughts on money in this passage. What I would like to suggest, however, is what these two theories have in common: and this is the role fear plays in the way we live our lives. So with that in mind, listen now for the word of God, speaking to you.

**Matthew 25:14-30**

<sup>14</sup>For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; <sup>15</sup>to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. <sup>16</sup>The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. <sup>17</sup>In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. <sup>18</sup>But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. <sup>20</sup>Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ <sup>21</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>22</sup>And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ <sup>23</sup>His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ <sup>24</sup>Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; <sup>25</sup>so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ <sup>26</sup>But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? <sup>27</sup>Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. <sup>28</sup>So take

the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. <sup>29</sup>For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. <sup>30</sup>As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Here ends this morning’s reading.

Now, before we move on, a word about the interpretation of this passage. I am sure you are familiar with the first interpretation: the third slave is lazy, and we are meant to gamble everything we have for God. To be fair – he was trying to be wise. Investing – speculating – is risky business, (unless, of course, it’s for God), and it was thought to be prudent to bury the talents. So the message is clear: when it comes to God, prudence doesn’t come into play.

Now, the interpretation that has become popular in the past 30 years rests on the fact that we simply do not read this parable the same way that someone from the first century would have. The first century Mediterranean worldview worked on a barter system. One person’s gain necessarily meant another person’s loss. The two servants who are here the heroes of the story from our perspective, would have been seen as villains back then. To have gotten such astronomical profit would have meant astronomical loss for someone else, and that would have been shameful. The third servant would have been seen as the honorable one, doing the responsible thing with the master’s money. Therefore, this interpretation argues, the master is not a symbol for God, but rather the world and corruption. And the whole parable is a metaphor for the way in which the world will treat you if you are a good and faithful steward of Jesus’ gospel message and stand up to tyranny.

This reading is attractive on many levels, and this might not seem so radical, I’d like to propose that they might not be all that opposed. In either scenario, the third servant is the prudent one, financially. The one with whom most of us resonate. In the first scenario, where God is the master, it is his caution that is punished. In the second scenario, where the master is a tyrant, it is his vocal objection that earns him God’s favor. And in either case, it is risk that is rewarded.

I must admit, however, I am inclined to believe the first, as Matthew himself was a tax collector – someone who gained at another’s expense. And sometimes I think the big JC hung out with tax collectors and used them as examples for shock value. Because that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? Shocking us into a different way of life?

So let us pray.

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, and the ways of all our lives, be risky enough to be acceptable in your sight O God, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Here is how a movie would paint this scene: blue skies – deep, rich, textured blue skies. Green sea and foam rhythmically breaking against the rocks. 10, 20, 30 feet of sheered brown and gray. And at the top, it’s almost as if the cliff was incomplete before their arrival: the three young adults, in their timeless cut-off jeans and swimsuits, standing at the top, hollering to each other, as much a part of the mountain as the rocks. And then, they step back, and almost in slow motion, two of them suddenly become a part of the air – arms flailing, knees tucked in a cannonball – suspended in the moment just after a choice has been made. All possibilities are open. Danger, ecstasy. For philosophy fans, we are tempted to call it Schrodinger’s jump. For the moment, in a free fall, their faces frozen in expressions of pure joy, they are suspended between blessing and curse – both possibilities equally likely, and therefore true. The Schrodinger moment, however, in reality is just a moment

before, and we see it in the third person: The third person is *not* suspended mid-air. The third person is glued to the mountain-top, peering nervously over the side. But she *has* chosen. In her fear of death, she has forfeited life. The moment where death and life, blessing and curse exist together side by side is this one: the moment of choice.

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\$100 here. \$100 there. His priestly collar hovering metaphorically over each disbursement, until he has done this 100 times. \$10,000, dyed in God's green ink, passed out to his parishioners. The condition, of course, is that this is God's money. What they do with it must reflect that. You can imagine the outcome – they make thousands upon thousands of dollars. They change the world. Are still changing the world.

This is a real-life event, upon which a real-life book has been written. *The Kingdom Assignment*, the story of pastor Denny Bellesi. So often is this example used in stewardship sermons, we might as well include it as required reading as part of the lectionary. Proof! If you jump off that mountain into faith in God, you will be wrapped into those sweet, sweet words “well done, my good and faithful servant.”

So badly do we want this to be an example of using what God has given us in the service of God that we don't have to imagine what God would say to those people. Well done, my good and faithful servant, well done. We know, with these people, what that must be like. We hear our God whispering to us, well done. Well done.

And so we are wounded, literally, when we hear this parable suggest instead that God might say, “you wicked and lazy servant.” They cut through us. And I imagine this pain is what drives so many people away from the Bible. Christianity. Religion. Wicked and lazy.

It stings. And I don't like this God very much. These are good people – with whom I identify. They have done what is right. They have faithfully cared for this gift of God – multiplied it. Made money from nothing. We see ourselves in them, and so if God were to say to them, “wicked and lazy,” we would hear God yelling at us, too. And our response is instinctive, just as that third servant's was: This is not a God I believe in. A God that would yell back, rather than praise the efforts of this church. That would punish the one man who had been prudent. And I hear myself cry out, “God, you are a harsh, harsh God, expecting to take what isn't yours – namely, me.” I am tempted to say that there is nothing good in this scripture, in all the scriptures, that there is nothing good in the idea of God, if the efforts of this Rev. Bellesi's church is met with God's anger.

I hate this parable.

There, I've said it. I know we aren't supposed to use words like hate, but it's true. But here's the thing. I don't hate it because the God in this picture is harsh. I don't. I don't actually think that God in this parable is being all that harsh. I hate it because I hear in it a reality I don't want to face. I am afraid of it. Because for all of its shock value, I hear the subtle truth.

How God treats us, how we see God, depends not on God, but on *us*. Not on what we do or don't do, but on our *expectations* about God. The first two servants open their arms to God's gifts and are met with gifts in abundance – apportioned lovingly with a parental knowledge of their abilities. Just as God has been extravagant with them, they are extravagant and give it *all* right back. Whether they had done well or poorly, whether their jump was profitable or not, they will always land in God's sweet words of joy – to those who have faith, more will be given. They *believe* the master is good and live as if they believe the master is good.

But the third. He receives more money, more joy, more responsibility and trust than he has ever seen, yet not more than he can handle, and he stands not in gratitude, not in joy, but in *fear*. He is *afraid* of God, the God that has given him so much, and so he stands at the top of that cliff, looking down, too afraid to jump. And because he *thinks* of God in fear and anger, he is *met* with God in fear and anger. God meets us where we are. He awaits his master's return not in gratitude, but in anger. "I know you reaped where you didn't sow."

But *shouldn't* God reap where God doesn't sow? Shouldn't God reap from anywhere and everywhere in the creation of the Kingdom?

And I think this third servant knows, somewhere deep inside, that God, the world, the universe has a right to be angry with him. If God *didn't* get angry about all the abuses and injustices and horrors of this world – if God *didn't* weep for the deaths in the Middle East, for the young man in Burlington, for the violence in Berkeley, what kind of God is that? If God *didn't* want something better for Greece or Italy, what kind of God would God be? If the very fabric of the universe *doesn't* get angry at us for burying our money and hiding our eyes, what kind of universe is that? What kind of parent would God be? Not just to us, but to all of Her children?

Perhaps the servant lashes out defensively, because he hears in God's anger the same thing I do: behind all the harsh words, I hear the soft weeping of a frustrated parent, at a loss for what to do. I hear the world weeping. I hear the soul of the universe weeping, sitting down, head in hands, whispering. "Of all the talents I have given you, of all the moments of sheer possibility, of all the moments of blue skies and warm, welcoming seas, of friendship and joy, of all the first kisses and first loves, of all the times you have been surrounded in the warmth of a kitchen, of a family, of all the heartbreaks that have made you who you are, of all the challenge you have overcome, of all the wages I have given you – 15, 50, 75 years' worth, you have set aside \$100 with which to do my work?! To feed my people? I am glad for your efforts. But is it really *my* goodness that is at stake here?!"

James Howell of the Christian Century writes that this is a terrible passage for Stewardship Sunday, because Stewardship Sunday is about "printing up catchy mailings, wheedling and cajoling; pledges bump up by 7 percent, and we celebrate. Isn't that the equivalent of the burial of the one *talanton*, and isn't it the harbinger of the burial of the church?" Indeed, if we are honest, most of our Stewardship Sundays are about celebrating the prudence of the third servant. This passage, on the other hand, meets that celebration with the sound of God's disappointment.

And yet, here's the thing about God's frustration, this is what the third servant doesn't understand: the skies remain blue. The miracle of a first snow fall is reflected in the eyes of our children, and our children's children. The challenge of a snowy driveway becomes the comfort of a fire and hot chocolate. The beauty of a melody cradles us. Each and every day we are given the opportunity to jump straight off into life. Oh, we might be cast out. We might end up in hell, but not because God puts us there. Because, like that third servant, we put *ourselves* there. If we think of God in fear, we will be met in fear. If we live our life in fear, we will be met with fear.

And that's where Howell is wrong. Church stewardship is about deciding where we want to place ourselves, what kind of life we want to live. It's true, our collective budget is such a small portion of our collective lives and incomes, that it might as well be that simple \$100 bill that Rev. Bellesi gave out. But here's what I hope: I hope that maybe, just maybe, today's Stewardship Sunday might help us see the offering *each week* like the top of that cliff – not as an offering *by* us, but an offering *to* us – an offering, an invitation to jump. An offering to live without fear. To choose life. I hope that maybe, just maybe, our pledges will help us each peek just a little

farther over the cliff. And maybe, just maybe, we'll stretch ourselves just enough so that we can see and hear the voices down below: first one voice, then two, then all of those who have gone before us singing up "come on in, the water is fine!"