

ONE-TALENT PEOPLE

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Towson Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 123
Matthew 25:14-30

Edmund Steimle, the long-time professor of homiletics at Union Seminary in New York, once remarked that “One of the curious facts about the Christian faith is that the biggest stumbling block in the way of our acceptance of it is not so much what we believe or don’t believe about God, but rather what we believe about ourselves.”

It is an observation particularly apt during our stewardship season, as we consider this morning’s text from Matthew’s gospel: one of the most familiar of the parables of Jesus, the parable of the talents. It is a simple story and yet, like most simple things, the longer you look at it the more questions it raises. And chief among the questions is this: Why is it that Jesus puts the one talent man on the spot? For no matter where you swing the spotlight over the story of the talents, it inevitably is drawn to this little man, cowering there before his master offering up his one talent all safe and sound.

And the question persists: Why did our Lord single out the one talent man for his scathing rebuke? He could just as well have told the story so that the five talent man could have been the object lesson, and you and I, ordinary one talent people, would have sat back and enjoyed the story so much the more. For who does not get a kind of unholy pleasure in seeing Jesus cut the Pharisee down to size or with his quick wit leave the chief priests mumbling in their beards? But not here. Here Jesus picks on this poor fellow who had so very little to begin with.

It is particularly curious in view of Christ’s usually sympathetic concern for the lone individual who had little to offer except that he was “lost” or a “sinner.” It’s the little, overlooked, and outcast individual who is almost invariably the hero of his other stories: a despised Samaritan, a wastrel son in a pigsty, a beggar named Lazarus. Why then the withering scorn with which he pictures this poor, cautious, fearful little man? After all, he had done nothing dishonest. He had simply done what most people did in those days to keep money safe. He’d dug a hole in the ground and buried it; and then when the master returned, he dug it up again and gave it back: “Here you have what is yours.” He wasn’t an evil or a selfish man. Why does Christ point the finger at him?

Actually, it is precisely because of our Lord’s great and constant concern for the little, apparently unimportant people and what we consider the insignificant things in life that he turns the spotlight on the one talent man. It is all part of his indefatigable campaign to reverse our ordinary scale of values.

Here we are, you and I, forever being hypnotized by the busy and important affairs of the world, with an insatiable appetite for size and bigness: the biggest house, the biggest car, the biggest box-office gross, the biggest company, the biggest

congregation in town, the biggest pledge. If it's big, we figure, it must be an indication of some unusual worth or value.

So, our Lord, in contrast, is forever picking out some insignificant detail and making that important: five loaves and two fishes—two small fishes—among five thousand; the tiniest seed he could think of, a mustard seed; the smallest coin in circulation, a widow's mite; a lily, a sparrow, a pinch of salt. All this to accustom our eyes to a new way of looking at things; that size and bigness are often enough a delusion and a snare, and the small and insignificant are loaded with possibilities.

And what is true in the world of things is true in the world of people. You and I are no doubt too spiritually attuned to measure a person by the size of his or her salary. But if not by the size of the salary and the bank account, what about the amount of responsibility someone carries? Isn't this a perfectly valid test by which to measure someone's worth and importance? Our society is based on merit, isn't it? The best people hold down the biggest, most responsible jobs—right?—directing the affairs of many people or managing large sums of money.

And yet notice how God works: Not in the center of the world's stage but off in a corner where you'd least expect him. First God chooses an obscure little nomadic tribe and promises them, of all people, his care. Then later God sends his Son, not into the center of things, but into an off corner of the world, born not even in a decent bed but in a stable in a tiny village; has him grow up like a peasant, not even in the center of that little country but in a back country district with a peculiar accent all its own; and finally has him buried in a borrowed tomb.

And this Son of God continues this same unrelieved emphasis upon the small and insignificant, shunning the big and important people, the five talent men and women who, as in the story, are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves, and in instead making friends with the oddest lot of unpromising souls you ever saw: a woman taken in adultery, a blind beggar along the roadside, and that ridiculous and impossible little man up a tree, Zacchaeus. And all of this to get us adjusted to this quite incredible idea that God is tremendously concerned about little ordinary people—about you and me!

So perhaps it's not so difficult to understand why the spotlight in the story is kept focused on the one talent man. That apparently is right in character. But it still doesn't answer the question why Jesus is so hard on the poor fellow in the parable.

Perhaps the answer is this: There are peculiar perils lying in wait for the five talent person, the man or woman of unusual opportunities and responsibilities—the perils of becoming smug, indifferent, aloof and loveless. But the one talent man is beset by his own peculiar perils too. Chief among them is that he is far too ready to think of himself as a little man, of no great importance to anybody, not even to God. He is the man with only one vote, so why bother? He is the anonymous city dweller who can wander from the straight and narrow with no one the wiser, so why not wander? He is the woman on the assembly line or the clerk in the big office, replaceable as a light bulb. He is the small stockholder in the big corporation whose sole responsibility is to cash his dividend check. He is the man who never makes the newspapers unless he dies or bites a dog. He is the occasional attender at church who prudently keeps the door open just a little for God, but avoids all the responsibility in church or community that he decently can—doesn't add

his name to the member rolls, doesn't volunteer, doesn't pledge— because someone else will do it if he doesn't.

I think it was this cringing self-debasement, this hiding behind the skirts of his littleness, which caused our Lord to blaze away at him in anger: “You wicked and lazy slave!” God was concerned about him, had risked everything for him, and he stands there cowering, not trusting God enough to make use of what God had given him.

And yet the fact of the matter is that God is accustomed to working wonders with little one talent people who have faith enough in Him to have some faith in themselves and their significance! Rip the haloes off the heroes and saints of the past. Take a look at them “before the halo”: Moses—a man with blood on his hands and a stammer in his tongue; James and John—loud-mouthed fishermen blustering about what big shots they were going to be in the kingdom of God; Peter—a blundering hulk of a man with his foot in his mouth half the time; Mary Magdalene—a troubled woman incapacitated by a debilitating mental illness; Paul—an unimpressive and bitter little Pharisee biting and snapping at the heels of the earliest Christians. Stand them up here without their haloes, these little one talent men and women whose one talent God took and twisted into a halo, so that today we call them saints!

So it goes even today. What would our church, our world be without little people, nobodies really, who are remarkable for only one thing. They do not, like this little man in the parable, go cowering along shrugging off their daily opportunities and responsibilities while they whine about the way things are going in the world. They take whatever God has placed in their hands, however unpromising it might appear, trusting only that somehow God will make something of it. And God *has* made something of it—and continues to do so—a movement which has changed the history of the world, not once, but a dozen times, and which will still be at it when capitalism and socialism and globalism and populism and all the other organizing principles that vie for our loyalty and energy are items in some future encyclopedia of ancient and extinct cultures.

So what about you? You, with that one talent of yours—or perhaps it's two! The spotlight shifts from this fearful, cautious little man in the parable and turns its glare on you. Naturally it would be more convenient if we could work the spotlight. We'd shift it in a hurry and, like the covers of *Time* magazine, keep it trained on the five talent people where it belongs: on the statesmen and entrepreneurs and visionaries and religious leaders and what God might get done in this world through the likes of them! But God handles the spotlight despite our feeble, fluttery protests about how we're really not very much; God keeps turning it back on you and me! God wants to know what we've done and what we're doing now with our God-given opportunities.

The fact of the matter is, if we take this parable seriously and the man who told it, all heaven—quite literally!—all heaven is in a sense breathless at this moment, watching on tiptoe, wondering about you and what kind of a person you are turning out to be. And equally, all heaven is watching us together, as a church, to see what we will make of this incredible collection of people that God's Spirit has called together in this time and place—and so richly endowed with diverse gifts and financial means and every good thing necessary to serve God's purposes in 2021 and beyond.

You don't believe it? That's not surprising. The Bible always did say that unbelief is the greatest of sins. And as Professor Steimle said the greatest obstacle to faith is not whether God is personal or not; not whether he is a God of love or not; not whether Jesus of Nazareth is really divine or only a good man. These questions are not the crucial ones because they can be debated without any personal involvement on our part. This is the crucial question, this is the obstacle: to believe that all heaven is tremendously concerned about you.

To be sure this does not strike us as being too strange when we apply it to somebody else: when a whole community turns out to look for a child who has wandered off into the woods; or when the community stands at the entrance to a mine shaft waiting for word about that one miner caught in a cave-in down below; or when a whole country picks up its morning newspaper with the prayer that that one kidnapped child has been found safe. That we can accept, that we should be concerned about the welfare of one lone individual who is somebody else. But that's not the point. The point is that this same concern—on a divine scale—is centered upon you!

God's biggest problem is not the big, important people. For one thing there are only a very few of them, really, and a surprising number of them are aware of their God-given opportunities just because they hold positions heavy with responsibility. No, ordinary one talent people are God's biggest problems because of the devilish notion that what we are and what we do is of very little moment except, perhaps, to a very small circle of relatives and friends. Whereas God has big plans, as God counts the word big, for us.

Do you begin to see why our Lord chose the one talent man and put him under the spotlight? And why he was so hard on him? Because that man, that woman is you. And God wants you to know, whether you believe it or not and no matter how incredible it may seem to you, that all heaven is at this very moment wondering about you and what kind of a person you are going to be; because the only kind of heaven God knows for this earth is the heaven he can bring to the earth only through you.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.