

Actively Good and Faithful

First of three sermons in the 2019 Stewardship “Caretakers” series

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October 14, 2018

- 2 Corinthians 9:6-8 Good News Translation ⁶ Remember that the person who plants few seeds will have a small crop; the one who plants many seeds will have a large crop. ⁷ You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly. ⁸ And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause.
- Matthew 25:14-30 Good News Translation “Well done, you good and faithful servant!” said his master. ‘You have been faithful in managing small amounts, so I will put you in charge of large amounts. Come on in and share my happiness!’” (v. 21)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Being “good and faithful” for God is an “active responsibility that takes initiative and risk.”¹

Today I take my text from a parable found in the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel. That chapter is probably best known for the parable that follows this one. *That* parable, often called “The Great Judgment” or “The Last Judgment,” contains the familiar verse offering the guidance, “...Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these [brothers or sisters] you did it to me.”²

But the story that Matthew presents just before that parable is pretty familiar, too. It describes a scene in which a wealthy and powerful man prepares to set out on a trip that will keep him away from his vast and valuable estate for an extended period. Before he leaves he dips into his vault and entrusts enormous amounts of money to three of his servants. He gives them different amounts based on his perception of their ability. The first servant is given 5,000 gold coins. Let me put 5,000 gold coins in context for you: back then to earn that much money a laborer would have to work seventy-five years.

Another servant is entrusted with 2,000 gold coins – it would take thirty years to earn that much. A third servant is entrusted with 1,000 gold coins, obviously much less than what was entrusted the other two, but still, quite a chunk of change: fifteen years’ worth of wages for a worker. What are they to do with it? The master doesn’t say. He gives them no instructions. But they know their boss. Workaholic. Wheeler-dealer. Risk-taker. Known to take advantage of opportunities that arose from time to time.

The first and second servants took their 5,000 and 2,000 “loans,” if you will, and put them to work, investing and buying and selling and growing the principal. They did really well: the first two servants succeeded in doubling the money, which pleased their master to no end when he returned. He praised them both and gave them even greater responsibilities. He said to each of them, “Well done, you good and faithful servant! ... You have been faithful in managing small amounts, so I will put you in charge of large amounts. Come on in and share my happiness!” (Note that to the master, 2,000 or even 5,000 gold coins was considered a “small amount”!)

...And then we know about the third servant. A financial planner would say that the third servant was totally “risk-averse.” He hadn’t been told to spend it or trade with it or invest

¹ New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII: Matthew-Mark. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 453b

² Matthew 25:40 New Revised Standard Version (bracketed text substituted for “who are members of my family,”)

it or anything. So he did nothing. He dug a hole in the ground and buried it, where it sat for who knows how long. The treasure entrusted to him was of no use... not to him, or to the master's estate, or to the community. You sow a seed, you expect a plant will grow. You stick money in the ground and all you get is musty, dirty cash.

As happy as the master was with the first two servants, he was equally incensed with the timid selfishness of the third servant. That servant showed no gratitude for the trust the master had shown toward him by handing over to him the equivalent of fifteen years' wages. That servant had squandered every opportunity to make something good come from the treasure entrusted to him. As the master said, "You didn't even put it in the bank to earn a little interest!"

This biblical story is a little unsettling. It's not neat and tidy. It's not a simple allegorical tale with the boss representing God, the various servants representing people from various nations or in different socio-economic classes or education levels, etc. How come the third servant gets chewed out if he didn't disobey any direct orders from his boss? Why did the first two servants get to keep their principal and earnings (that's what's implied in the second-to-last verse)? And why was the third servant's carefully protected money taken away from him?

Here's why: it's because parables are not intended to be neat and tidy. Parables are not morals with a clear lesson about good and bad. Parables are supposed to make us think twice, to ponder, to wonder.

What does this parable say to us today? I think we find a clue in the commendation the master offered to the first two servants – the familiar "Well done, you good and faithful servant!" What made them "good and faithful," at least in the master's eyes? It was their response to having been entrusted with money.

Our congregation's stewardship invitation for 2019 is captured in the simple title "Caretakers." We might picture a caretaker as someone watching over the palatial property belonging to a wealthy celebrity. Maybe when we hear the word caretaker we picture someone trimming the shrubbery and cutting the grass at a quaint old cemetery.

What do those images of caretakers have in common? Caretakers are active. They're doing something with what's entrusted to them. They truly can be described as *engaged* with what they've been given, active in order to advance its value and to put it to good use. Their actions are spurred by a sense of gratitude for the ability to do something, to accomplish something, to make a difference with that which has been placed in their care.

We, too, are caretakers. We, too, are entrusted with money. Some of us have enough that we never think about money. Some of us can't help but constantly think about money because it's hard to come by. But we all have treasure that passes through our hands regularly. God our "master" gives us many gifts constantly, and not merely for our own sustenance. God's gracious generosity toward us allows us to become aware of and appreciate our condition of being "blessed."

Brother David Steindl-Rast is a Benedictine monk noted for a lifetime of reflection and action around the practice of gratitude. Brother David has observed: "Ninety-nine percent of the time we have an opportunity to be grateful for something. We just don't notice it. We go through our days in a daze."³

Because our human nature causes us to "go through our days in a daze," the church creates seasons of stewardship reflection like this one to encourage mindfulness about our role as active caretakers of God's countless blessings.

³ Cited by Diana Butler Bass, *Gratitude: the transformative power of giving thanks*. New York: HarperOne, 2018, 54: Br. David Steindl-Rast, "Practicing Gratitude," www.gratefulness.org/resource/practice-gratitude. Originally appeared in *Sacred Journey* magazine, October 2001.

Is our response to a stewardship appeal supposed to be determined solely by how we feel about our church at the moment? No. Author, professor and columnist Diana Butler Bass has written that “Gratitude is... more than just an emotion. It is also a disposition that can be chosen and cultivated, an outlook toward life that manifests itself in actions – [gratitude] is an ethic... [it’s] what we do.”⁴ As we saw in the first two servants who were called “good and faithful” in the parable, gratitude results in action.

Let me speak from my own experience. I’ve described before how my stewardship ethic was formed. Here’s the condensed version. First, from as young as I can remember my parents trained me to give part of my allowance as an offering to the church every week. Then, when I was in sixth or seventh grade I noticed that my father put a twenty-dollar bill in the offering plate. Twenty dollars today is nothing to sneeze at, but fifty years ago that was a lot of money, especially in a single-income home raising four kids. I had rarely seen that much money. Noticing that subtle act—he wasn’t flaunting it—taught me that giving to the church was a priority for my family—showing gratitude for God’s gifts of life and love, family and friends, food and shelter, work and rest.

When my wife read through this sermon last night (she always reads through them for me), she remembered a comparable story from her life. She’s not sure if she was in elementary or junior high school, but she does remember seeing a check on the kitchen table. It was for their church and it was for \$200. She doesn’t know if it was for a month or a week, but she knew it was a lot of money. That substantial gift confirmed for her that being able to give was important to who her parents were.

Because of that modeling, that training from our families, being able to give to our church has always been a priority for Mary and me. Now our church pledge is the largest single destination of our household income. Of course, it wasn’t always that way. But even when we were newlyweds just setting up a household, when we were raising one, then two, then three little boys, even when we were paying college tuition, we’ve always actively worked on how we can increase our offering every year. Like the two servants who took the initiative of trading and investing their master’s assets, we, too, have taken some risks—not crazy ones, but trusting God to help us fulfill our responsibilities at home as we also trusted God to help us support the ministry and mission of our church.

Your story probably bears some similarities to ours, but some differences, too. But here’s the truth: a sense of gratitude inspires action, and our action fans the flames of gratitude. God has planted within you the capacity to be a giver. God graces you with joy from giving. You give for the sake of others... and you also give for your own sake, too—to be able to express your gratitude for God’s gifts of life, faith, love, purpose. “To choose gratitude is to hear an inner urging toward thanks, to be aware of the grace in life, and to respond.”⁵ The two servants were deemed “good and faithful” because of their response to the blessings of the master. By our deliberate choice to be active caretakers of God’s blessings given to us for Christ’s sake, we, too, will know what it is to be called “good and faithful.”

[Sermons: sc20181014; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

⁴ Bass, Gratitude, 52

⁵ Bass, Gratitude, 89