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“The end is near!” Not the end of the world, but of the liturgical year. Next week is the Feast of Christ the King, and the following week is the First Sunday of Advent, the start of a new liturgical year. The fact that we structure our worship differently from the calendar year indicates that our lives should have a different focus. The liturgical year is not simply a cyclical repetition of the same weeks and months year after year.

Instead, it is an annual spiritual journey towards an end point, and we are almost there. In this way, the liturgical year reinforces that our lives are not a random collection of experiences, but our lives have a purpose, a goal, an end-point.

In Matthew, today’s parable is the second of three passages dealing with some aspect of Jesus’ return and the Last Judgment, and the lectionary maintains that sequence. Last week we heard the parable of The Ten Bridesmaids (Matthew 25:1-12), who were waiting for the bridegroom (Jesus), who was delayed. Next week we will read a description of the Final Judgment in the parable of The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46). As part of that sequence, the master who goes away in this parable represents Jesus after the Ascension.

At this point some of you might be hoping I will reveal when he is coming back. So let me tell you. No. I can’t. For almost two thousand years since the death and resurrection of Jesus people have speculated about the timing of the Second Coming, some even to the point of setting specific dates. But none of those dates have come to pass, which is the basis for one of the most accurate book titles that I own, namely “The Last Days are Here Again: A History of the End Times.” Surprisingly, the fact that such “date setters” have always been wrong has never stopped subsequent predictions, in some cases even by the same people recalculating and offering new dates. Many contemporary preachers continue such predications, but all of them have proven inaccurate thus far.

The second reading tells us why. Paul tells the Thessalonians that, “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” Jesus himself says “no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt 24:36). It is the epitome of hubris to claim to know what Jesus himself did not. Moreover, it is impossible for him to return “like a thief in the night” when so many people are on TV announcing that he is coming.



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They need to be quiet and everyone needs to act like they don't think Jesus is coming back, so we can fake out God and Jesus can return. Or we can just continue to proclaim the mystery of faith during the Eucharistic Liturgy, confessing our faith that he will return, but without any attempt to specify when. Then we will be like the Thessalonians, awaiting Jesus without speculating about "times and seasons."

This is the viewpoint in today's parable. The master's absence was lengthy, but that point is not emphasized and the slaves are not surprised when he eventually comes back. So Jesus' delayed return is not the issue in this parable. Instead, the focus is on the fact that each slave is called to render an account of how he has handled the master's property while he was gone.

In the parable a man entrusts different amounts of "talents" to three different slaves. This "talent" is not to be confused with the English meaning of a "gift" or "skill." The talents belong to the man, not the slaves, and since the first two slaves give back double the amount to him, the parable itself deals with financial matters, not personal "talents."

The talent was a unit of money that equalled about 6,000 days' wages for the average worker. The amounts of money involved, therefore, are substantial. The first two slaves use the talents they are given for trade, but the third one buries the single talent he has been given. This was a fairly common practice for safekeeping in the ancient world: Matthew 13:44 compares God's reign to a treasure hidden in a field, and the Romans found valuables buried in a number of locations when they destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE.

When the master returns he summons the slaves to receive an account of how they have managed his money. The first two doubled the amounts in their care but the third slave has made no profit with his single talent. He was afraid of his master, whom he considers "a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed." Rather than risk not meeting his master's expectations, he hid the talent in the ground to make sure he would at least be able to give it back when the time came.



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The master angrily quotes the slave's own words back to him: since the slave knew that the master expected to receive something back from the work of others, he should at least have invested it. The interest it would have earned would not have increased the talent's value as much as the other two slaves did through trade, but at least it would have generated some profit. Therefore, the third slave is cast "into the outer darkness," in contrast to the first two, who are welcomed "into the joy of your master." The conclusion is obvious: the two who took risks and thereby benefited their master were rewarded, while the one who played it safe was punished.

I noted earlier that this parable in itself is not about how we use our natural talents, but rather the story of a master calling his slaves to account for how they have handled different amounts of money. Nonetheless, when we consider the parable's meaning for Matthew's audience and for us, what we do with our abilities is relevant. In fact, the English nuance of the word "talent" as "ability" is based on this very passage. So, by extension, the parable teaches that we will all eventually be called to account for how we have used what God has given us: not sums of money, but abilities. The metaphor of an ancient talent, a significant amount of money, points to the importance of those abilities and how we manage them. Just like the master in the parable, a time will come when God will ask each of us how we have used those abilities for the benefit of the kingdom.

But there is more to this than a simple mathematical accounting. Each slave is given a different number of talents, "each according to his ability." Through this phrase Matthew recognizes the diversity of the Christian community, both then and now, as do other Second Testament writers. For instance, Paul says in Romans that, "we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us" (Romans 12:6). In 1 Corinthians 12 he describes the Christian community as a body with different parts that all contribute to the proper functioning of the whole body. Ephesians 4:11-12 lists a variety of ministerial gifts that God has given to different members of the community "for building up the body of Christ."



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This recognition that people have different abilities should both comfort and challenge us. For one thing, it frees us from having to do everything ourselves. This is good, because no one can do it all. Each person tends to be good at a few things, but together we have all the gifts we need to build the kingdom of God. Recognizing that we have strengths but also weaknesses helps keep us humble and forces us to rely on others for the things we cannot do well. At the same time, we are inspired to serve within our own areas of strength for the good of the community. In this way we will live out Paul's teaching that, just as the various parts of the human body need each other in order to function as a whole, so too the Church depends on its members working together, each performing the functions that God enables them to do (1 Corinthians 12).

The first reading provides a model of someone using her abilities for the benefit of the community. The lectionary reading is a series of verses taken from a longer 22-verse poem that comes at the end of the book of Proverbs. There are two things to note at the outset. First, the lectionary calls the woman "capable" but the Hebrew word is usually translated "valiant" when used of men, indicating people who have the courage to take risks. Second, it is the woman, not her husband, who manages the household to great success, not just for her own benefit, or just that of her family, but for the benefit of the entire household and beyond, using her financial gain to help (the text says she "reaches out her hands") the poor and needy. The fact that this poem was written in a patriarchal society and serves as both a conclusion to and illustration of the wisdom contained in Proverbs, including frequent negative evaluations of women, should not be overlooked. The ancient Israelites were capable of rising above their own culture and so are we.

Another comforting aspect of the parable is that although the first two slaves return a different amount to the master, they receive the same reward. The master addresses the exact same words to both: they are both promised authority over "many things" and told to "enter into the joy of your master." This means that our service of God is not a competition. God does not treat us according to how much we have done compared to others, but according to how much we have done compared to ourselves. We are to use our gifts for the greatest benefit of God and the community, and not worry about what someone else does with her or his abilities. As long as we each offer all we can for the sake of others, we will receive the same reward.



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But that introduces a challenge: we have to identify what our “talent” is and then we have to use it to the very best of our ability. What’s more, we have to be willing to take risks. Remember that the first two slaves each doubled the amount of money they were given. To double one’s investment takes skill, but it also requires courage (especially in the current financial market). There is always the potential for failure. The opposite approach is to follow the example of the third slave, who hid his money. Granted, it did not lose any of its value, but it gained nothing either, and therefore did not benefit the master or his household. In the same way, the kingdom of God is worth taking risks for, including the risk of falling short or even failing outright. That is part of what it means to have faith: being willing to take a chance, relying on God to assist us.

Each of us needs to decide what we have to offer for the sake of the kingdom. The first place to look is at our natural abilities, which come from God. God does not give us these gifts merely for our own benefit, but for the benefit of all. Eventually God will ask what we have done with those abilities. Our actions will determine whether we, too, hear those words of praise: “Well done, good and trustworthy servant.”

John L. McLaughlin, Ph.D.