

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

15th Sunday after Pentecost

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Matthew 25:14-31

Title: “Serving from the Heart: Resources”

We’re exploring serving from the heart and not the head in this series as we consider spiritual gifts. Two weeks ago we took a look at spiritual gifts. Last week I heard that Shelby did a great job exploring talents during worship as God calls us to use the skills and abilities we’ve received or cultivated to serve others and to glorify God. This morning we take a look at our resources.

When it comes to resources we Christians say that all we have belongs to God. Everything. Our cars, homes, clothes, insurance policies, food, boats, bikes: you name it, it belongs to God. That’s what we say. So what have our resources to do with the spiritual life? What does sharing our time, commitment, money, home, car, skills, contacts—all those things we have at our disposal to use: what do they have to do with our relationship with God and other people?

One of the clear teachings of Jesus on the matter comes from Matthew 6:19-21. There Jesus preaches,

¹⁹ “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust^[a] consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰ but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust^[b] consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This oft-repeated teaching is easily understood—at least from the head. We understand what Jesus is claiming here. We know that our financial resources, our cars and houses--our iPads, Pods and Phones--that these things will disintegrate in time. The iPhone 5 will give way to the iPhone 6. The new car will become the old car in time. The home can fall into disrepair as we--and it--gets older. And when we die, we can’t take any of it with us. We know this. These are things that “moth and rust consume and...thieves [can] break in and steal.”

Years ago when I was serving as pastor of St. Luke’s in Essexville, Morris Shaw came into see me. He and his wife, Mia, and I had become friends over the years I served there. They had no children, no close friends or relatives, and Morris came to talk with me about serving as a trustee of their estate trust when they both died. He said they wanted to leave their estate to the church and wanted me to handle that on their behalf. I was surprised by the request and discovered later how naïve I was in saying “yes” without really understanding what he was asking of me. It was only later when I was in the midst of arranging for the liquidation of their estate that several things struck me about it:

First, how profound it was to be so trusted.

Second, how much work it is.

Third, I came to understand in a way I never had before that nothing we have in this life will last. If we have children, they may keep some of our stuff but most of it will be sold off and take up residence somewhere else.

Fourth, we really are but stewards of all the resources we are fortunate to have and only own them the short while our bodies breathe and move and take nourishment.

Fifth, my friends were investing in things of eternal value. They gave their resources to serve the glory of God and other people. Their gift is still giving today and will be giving as long as that congregation exists because it was invested in the church's endowment fund.

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” What we decide to do with our resources has a great deal to do with demonstrating where our heart is, what we deeply value. Jesus taught his disciples to invest resources in that which has eternal value.

But Jesus doesn't just teach about how we might invest resources at our disposal. There are also teachings that have to do with the trust implied in the receiving those resources from God. And so in Matthew we have this parable. A master calls together his slaves at his own initiation, the slaves didn't ask for it. He gives each of them some money, trusts them with his belongings. Then he goes away. Upon his return, the master takes an accounting of what was done with that which he gave to them. The first two are rewarded and celebrated, but the one with the least was chastised. Not only was he chastised, but what little he had was taken from him and given to the one who had the most.

I confess that I don't like the ending of this parable. If the master is supposed to be God or Jesus—which we are never told he is, then how does that figure square with Jesus who also proclaimed, “the first shall be last and the last first”? Doesn't this parable contradict this other well-known teaching of Jesus?

Perhaps one reason the injustice against the one talent guy strikes me so forcefully is that he is an underdog. Remember each was given to him according to his ability. He had only one talent. Apparently, he was not a gifted, successful investor as were his colleagues, else his master would have given him more. Purchasing UPS stock the first day it was publicly offered never would have entered his mind. The first guy, however, would have jumped at the chance, increasing his take by 60% or so the very first day the stock went public. Not the one talent guy. Far more conservative. Not willing to risk the one talent he had.

So not only were the dollars given him fewer than his colleagues, but—again--this slave's gifts and abilities were also limited. He wasn't one of those persons who was successful with everything he did. Multi-talented he was not. Most of us, I suspect, can identify with that. Not many of us have multiple talents at which we excel, and I don't know anyone who thinks they have unlimited resources to use. We have our limits, too, don't we? So when the one talent guy buries the money given him, it just doesn't sound so bad to me. He's conservative, trying to preserve what the master put in his hands.

However, when the master returns, I can understand some frustration with the lack of initiative. The slave could have done something with that which was entrusted to him, even an extremely conservative approach of putting the money in a savings account would have shown some initiative. I can understand a long lecture about the way in which inflation diminishes capital and the need to invest at least at the rate of inflation in order to maintain the value of those dollars, but the master goes to

extremes and harshly condemns him.

Why does the master become so angry and act so harshly?

There is another way to understand this parable. Just maybe the focus is not on the end of the story with the one talent guy condemned. That part may be our focus because we identify with him or because we object to the apparent injustice. Maybe the focus in Jesus' telling of the story is on the beginning. Maybe the story is really about the master, about God, a story about the generosity of God who trusts us with everything God has.

You see, the value of one talent my commentary says was equal to 15 years wages for a laborer. At minimum wage, we're talking about \$160,000. One talent. A lot of responsibility. One slave remember was given 5 talents, another was given two, and the last, one talent. Do the math. We're talking about a lot of money. The master calls them together, gives the three of them over one million dollars, the keys to his Mercedes, his stock portfolios, everything he has worked to build and maintain, and trusts them to take care of it in his absence. So when he returned and discovered one of them had simply buried it out of fear, it raised anger and one of the more difficult passages in the New Testament:

“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. . . . You wicked and lazy slave.”

Or to say it another way, “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.”

Why?

Bishop Will Willimon suggested that we remember that in a few more chapters in the Gospel According to Matthew Jesus will be on the cross. He's on his way to Jerusalem to give away everything he has -- his very life, and along the way he tells this story of a master who gives all he has to three of his slaves, one of whom does nothing with the gift but bury it. “Does that put the master's anger in context?” he asks.

I remember conversations with a couple of students in college. Parents were paying the way for one. Scholarships and grants provided funding for the other. In spite of their good fortune of having their education paid for, they partied late into the night, stereos blasting, rooms shaking. Kept my roommate and me up many a night in the room below them. One of us would call security. They'd come and quiet them down, but it was a constant battle. Their studies -- it seemed -- weren't important to them. Learning was secondary to having a good time. Didn't seem to matter that parents and others were working to provide their education. As long as they passed, they appeared satisfied. I wondered how the parents who had worked and saved to put the one through school felt. Did they know he was burying the gift they'd given him? I don't know this for certain, of course, but it seems reasonable to suspect that had they known—or maybe they did and I didn't know it--they would have been angry with that son.

The master had a right to be angry with the one who did nothing with the gift but hide it away. It went unused, unappreciated, unshared. Isn't that the point of the parable after all? Jesus the Christ provides us with the gift of the kingdom of God, connects us with God in extraordinary ways and invites us to share the gift. It may be that we're one talent people with just a few resources. Nonetheless, we're called to share what we have received.

I read the story of a woman who had few abilities to boast about, but there was one thing she did very well. She was known for baking the best oatmeal cookies around. Granted that may not sound like much, but she found a way to share that one thing she was known for in service to others. Whenever she'd bake a batch of cookies, she'd make an extra batch. She'd wrap up several cookies in small boxes. Made up quite a few boxes. Put a note inside: "I know you're going through a rough time right now, but remember God loves you and wants to be with you." Then she'd take them to the county jail and gave them to the prisoners. A little gift, but when given in service to others, it can do extraordinary things.

There are many such examples I could list from the life of this congregation like that story. I wonder how many of you know that when Emily Garlinghouse discovered through the Vital Church Initiative consultation process how important it was to follow-up with first time guests that she and Chad committed themselves to making baked goods and delivering them to first-time guests in order to provide a warm welcome.

Or how many of you know that the great time and effort many have put into the Community Garden produced not just wonderful, fresh vegetables for our neighbors, but also a note of gratitude someone left one day. The note was written on a napkin and left on the produce stand. It was written by someone who was out of work who said money was tight as a result and that the produce picked up from our stand was being used for fellowship and ministry in addition to feeding the person's family and how grateful the writer was for the gift received. And this morning, I found a thank you note in my box. Handwritten, here's what it says:

Being a new resident to the Auburn area, I was surprised to learn from my neighbors of the community garden. I have enjoyed the fresh vegetables as well as my neighbors. I have made and shared many meals for those who don't cook as they used to. On a fixed income and fellow senior, I can't thank you and your parishioners enough for such a great garden. They put a lot of hard work into it and I surely appreciated it.

Sincerely,

Judy Ramsay.

I remember sitting in Sharon and John Senn's kitchen table not long before John died. John got emotional when he talked about giving to the church. His eyes welled up with tears and he raised an index finger, pointed to the ceiling and said, "It all belongs to Him. I wouldn't be anything without Him."

When the consultation process resulted in the awareness that we needed to hire a coordinator of children's ministry, we didn't know where the money would come from, but when the invitation went out for people to consider increasing their pledges in order to sustain the ministry that Tina Musial is now leading, many of you responded generously and have made it possible for her ministry to continue. In part, as a result of Tina's leadership, participation in vacation bible school doubled this last year, so more children heard the stories of God's love for them and Jesus' care for them. Two weeks ago when the Vietnam Memorial moving wall came to town, Tina coordinated efforts for this congregation to take a turn in feeding volunteers serving there and when I went to talk with leaders about the memorial service in which I was participating, I heard from them how much they appreciated the church's support and how

much Tina had done to assist them.

God provides all of us with resources. There's not a person in this room who has not been given resources whether time, money, material possessions, hobbies or people on our contact list. Ultimately, it all belongs to God because none of us are taking them with us.

What resources do you have that can be used for the glory of God and to serve other people? As you consider what it means for you to serve from the heart, I invite you to prayerfully consider choosing one resource at your disposal that isn't currently being put to use to serve others or for God's purposes. How might you begin to use it for eternal purposes?

When we share our resources from the heart and not the head, it reflects our gratitude to the One who has entrusted us with everything.