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Homily- A28
Matthew 25:14-30

Betting the Farm

Talenti, some of you may know, is the name of a wickedly delicious, small-batch ice cream. Now, I don't have much of a sweat tooth, but *Talenti* sea-salt, caramel ice cream is something I have a hard time passing up. If I'm in the frozen food aisle at the store, it seems to call to me from inside the freezer! "*Here I am …"* I have to close my eyes and keep walking.

Well, Matthew's famous *Parable of the Talents* is not about *Talenti* ice cream, but it IS about extravagant things given to us. You see, the *talenti* … the talents that the parable describes, are not as modest as the numbers assigned to them: 5, 3, and 1. Luke calls them 'pounds,' which **was** actually a modest amount in the ancient world. A TALENT, however, is another thing entirely. Scholars debate the monetary value of an ancient talent. In the end, it doesn't really matter. Because a talent just denotes an immense amount of money. In Jesus' time, one single talent was more than an average person would earn in an entire lifetime! So in our parable, the rich man entrusts three servants, with something like 5 million, 3 million, and 1 million dollars! The outcome is familiar to us: two of them make something of what was entrusted to them, but the third one hides it under the mattress to protect himself from losing it. Given the unvarnished character profile this third servant gives of his hard-dealing employer, we might think that <u>less</u> risk <u>would</u> have been the better choice. But that is NOT how things turn out. In his self-justification, the third servant shows he was FULLY aware of his own nature, AND of his master's nature. He thinks he should be rewarded for preserving the capital, but he has misunderstood both himself and his master. His reckoning is completely accurate <u>and</u> completely misguided. It is a great illustration that your *math* may be right --- but your goals may be all wrong!

Over the centuries this parable, like many others, has been viewed as an allegory – and given the fact that Jesus uses this one to teach about the Kingdom of Heaven, an allegorical interpretation seems reasonable. But that also runs the risk of turning this into a nice little tale about using one's natural talents and resources for good, rather than, as another parable says: hiding one's light under a bushel. This parable

is far too extravagant for such domestication. The TALENTS are obscene amounts of money. The master places an obscene amount of trust in his servants. The punishment for doing nothing in order to safeguard the capital is obscenely cruel. If this parable is an allegory, that makes Jesus into a rapacious capitalist and a vindictive employer… something like a robber baron! (And the suggestion that the third servant should have deposited the capital into an investment account with bankers would be a direct violation of the Torah, where the charging of interest – ANY interest – was equivalent to USURY. Jesus would not advocate such a serious breach of the Torah.) For these reasons and others, a simple allegorical interpretation does not do justice to this parable.

Like a chance stroll down the ice cream aisle, this parable teaches something about the GIVENS we simply chance upon in our lives, and what we DO with those givens. Remember these are excessively powerful, influential givens, over which we had no say at all, but with which we have to negotiate. They are powerful and uncompromising, because they come to us ready or not.

I am speaking here about the most fundamental givens. First, our natural legacy: none of us had any choice over our birth. We came into this world we did not choose, by parents we did not choose, with a body we did not choose. Then there is our social legacy: none of us had any choice over the society or culture into which we were born. Those social arrangements are very powerful accidents of birth. We had NO INPUT in creating the culture that exercises power over us. Then there is our historical legacy: we were born into a time and a history that we simply inherited. And then there is our economic legacy: every human is born into a preexisting economic system.

THESE are the TALENTS – the uncompromising GIVENS – that we were each born into. Like birth, history, and culture: these givens are immense, prodigious, and awesome powers in our lives. To pretend otherwise is either hubris or naivete. But the parable doesn't STOP at these givens. There is more to the story. There is the NEGOTIATION with these givens that constitutes the rest of our lives. You see, one of the things the parable points out is that in addition to the immense talents, the master also placed an immense, profligate, and almost obscene TRUST in his servants. For the servants, this TRUST is as much an extravagant GIVEN as the TALENTS are!

The servants have agency, and choice, in what they can do with the givens. But here is the sobering rub: unless they exercise their agency, choice, and judgment, unless they take those RISKS, they will never know the power they DO have in this life. The parable pulls no punches here: **free will is risky**. But it too is a great gift, an extravagant TALENT, that God has given us. Another thing we had no say over! While we have no say over what was *given* to us, WE can pass along a changed set of givens for those who come after us, if we risk what life has bequeathed *to us*. We reveal our purposes by our choices. The parable puts this in stark terms: do we aim for safety and self-preservation, or do we aim for healing, growth, and wholeness – something the Bible calls: SALVATION.

There are two unimaginably abundant gifts that life offers us: grace *and* free will. We did nothing to earn our own existence, but the temptations to squander it or deceive ourselves are always close at hand. When the master says to the third servant 'you wicked and lazy slave,' that is a rather poetic translation. The Greek actually says: 'you evil, gutless coward!' O U C H!

Unlike Luke, who speaks to a general audience, Matthew is specifically speaking to the CHURCH, to us! So this parable is about what BELIEVERS do with God's gifts BETWEEN the resurrection of Jesus and the return of Jesus. In the end Matthew pulls no punches. Building the Kingdom is NOT about RISK MANAGEMENT. It is about offering everything back to God. You can call it 'leaving it all on the field,' or 'betting the farm.' But THAT is the kind of urgency this parable is about. It isn't rational and it isn't sweet: but neither is grace, salvation, or a changed set of GIVENS for those who come after us. The extravagant HOPE that this parable holds out for us is that God has ALREADY GIVEN US EVERYTHING we need to build the Kingdom. We already have the hands and hearts to work with Christ in his great love for this world!

This week: DO something with the ice cream God has given you.