

As human beings, we have a natural desire to quantify things. Which is a fancy way of saying that we like to take a vague concept and put a number on it.

The law tells us to drive a safe speed on a road. And we immediately ask, “How fast is 'safe'?” So we put a number on it. We quantify it. We set a speed limit. And we say, “Go 55 mph. That's safe.”

Doctors tell us that we should get a healthy night's sleep. And we immediately ask, “What is 'healthy'?” So we put a number on it. We quantify it. And we say, “Get 7-8 hours of sleep at night. That's healthy.”

The same thing is true of value. We're told that a painting is extremely valuable. And we immediately ask, “How valuable?” So we put a number on it. We quantify it. And we say, “Oh, it's worth \$1 million.” How did they come up with that number? Really, it's kind of arbitrary. But as human beings, we must have it quantified for us. We must put a number on it.

We have a situation like that in our Gospel lesson today. Where we hear about three servants who are each given something extremely valuable. How valuable? Well, in the parable, for each of them it is worth between one and five talents.

I've mentioned this before, but you may have forgotten: a “talent” is a gold brick worth roughly 20 years wages. Hundreds of thousands of dollars. A talent was a lot of money. And so one of these men is given five gold bricks, one is given two gold bricks, and one is given one gold brick.

Now when I say that they are “given,” I don't mean given as a gift. The first verse in the passage says that the master “entrusted to them his property.” He'll be away. He doesn't need it. So he's loaning this enormous pile of money to them. Investing it in them, you might say. Showing incredible trust that they will use it wisely until he returns. And maybe even pay him back with a little interest.

Two of them use this money, double the investment from their business ventures, and are rewarded for their labor. The third buries it, hands it back to his master unused, and is punished for being... well... incompetent, and worthless to his master.

Now, around the country right now, there are probably thousands of Christians reading this passage, saying to themselves, “It's about stewardship. God gives me money and resources. Time, talents, and treasures. And he expects me to use them wisely. Just like the men in the parable.”

Except that there's a problem with that logic. Parables are always an analogy for something else. Something completely different. They're metaphors. Object lessons. Symbols of a deeper meaning. And if you take them literally, you're going to end up missing the point.

So, yes, the Bible does love to talk about money and how we handle it. Which is why this parable uses money as a symbol. Because it's a subject we know really, really well.

We understand the value of money, because we can very easily put a number on it. We understand what it means to work hard for money, because we can quantify the effort it takes to earn our paycheck. We understand the great trust the master put in his servants by loaning them this great treasure.

But if we want to understand what the money represents, we have to look deeper. So let's dissect this for a minute. What is Jesus' point here? Well, first of all, in this parable he talks about a master. And when Jesus uses the word “master” in a parable, you can just about always replace it with the word “God.” God is always the master in Jesus' parables, in some way or another.

But this particular master is leaving for a long time. He'll be back, but his servants don't really know when. That sounds kinda familiar. It sounds an awful lot like what Jesus says about his own departure at the ascension and his return on the last day. And given the fact that this parable is right in the middle of a series of parables talking about the end of the world, I think it's safe to say that the master is not just a symbol for God, but a symbol for Jesus Himself.

Which makes the servants in this parable His disciples. His 12 disciples back then. And His disciples right here, right now, in this very room. Disciples who have been entrusted with something of great value. Something that the master earned only by great effort. Something that so important to the master that it shows tremendous trust in his servants to loan it to them. But which He expects us to use and to grow until it doubles in size.

And that something is called “the Gospel.” The message of salvation by Jesus' blood. And while the parable may quantify it in terms of gold bricks, so that we can understand it's enormous worth, it's even more accurate to say that it's of priceless value. Because it comes to us only by the great effort of our Lord on the cross. Which he gives to us only because we are his beloved children. But which he expects us to use daily for the work of His kingdom.

Go therefore and make... money? Buildings? Welfare programs? Investment accounts? No. Go therefore and make disciples. Of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And teaching them everything God's Word tells us. That is our talent of gold to invest. Our treasure from heaven that He has given us while He's away.

And if we do our job as His servants, as His disciples, that message of forgiveness and salvation will only grow. It will grow in our lives. It will grow in the lives of others. And it will grow by making new disciples who share the Word of God and bring still more to the waters of Baptism and the Table of our Lord.

Because the master will return. And He will look to see what we've done with these treasures He has given us. And if we tell Him that we buried them in the ground because we thought He was a hard man who was simply harvesting a crop that He didn't plant. That we didn't think it was our job to grow God's kingdom.

Well then He's going to tell us, “You don't know what it means to be in my kingdom. You don't know what it means to be my disciple. Get out. I've got better uses for this treasure than wasting it on you.”

It's a harsh message. But it's also an oddly hopeful message. It's hopeful for two reasons. One, because the master hasn't returned. There's still time to invest these treasures God has given us in the lives of others. Every moment of your life in which Christ hasn't returned is an opportunity to repent of your failures as His servant and receive His forgiveness.

But maybe more importantly, it's a hopeful message because we don't have to worry about how we invest it. The master in the parable doesn't condemn the third servant because he made a bad investment. He condemns him for not doing anything with the money at all.

He took the Gospel and he buried it in the ground. Kept it out of sight from everyone. He hid it not only from the rest of the world, but from himself. He didn't even make use of it for his own benefit. Let alone the benefit of others.

And the two who did use their money? Well, they doubled their investment almost effortlessly, it seems. They took the master's treasure, used it, and it grew. The reality is that Word and Sacrament ministry - the simple act of sharing the Gospel and growing the Kingdom of God - it's really not that hard.

We just have to try. We just have to do something with this gift that God has given us. And the profit will come. And even if it's somehow a bad investment. Even if our attempt is a complete and utter failure, we've still been more faithful to our master than those who would bury it in the ground..

We have freedom in Christ. Freedom to succeed... and freedom to fail. Christ takes up our yoke. He takes up our burden. He makes our work as His servants light and easy and free of all condemnation. He is not the hard man that the third servant describes. He is a wise and generous master.

And he gives us this great treasure as a blessing. As a sign of confidence and trust and love. So that on the day he returns, he can walk up to every one of us. Pat us on the back. And say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. And now I have so much more I want to give you.” Amen.