



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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GIVE WHAT'S RIGHT, NOT WHAT'S LEFT

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Matthew 25.14-30 (abbreviated)

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another he gave one talent, asking each to be good stewards of what he had given them. When the man returned from his journey, he asked for an accounting of the money he had entrusted to them. The first servant who had been given five talents had doubled his money. "Master," he said, "you entrusted me with five and I have gained five more." "Well done, good and faithful servant," the master said. "You have been faithful with a few things, so I will put you in charge of many things. Come share my happiness."

The man with the two talents also had doubled his investment, and the master praised him for his faithful stewardship. Then the third man, who had been given one talent, reported that he had buried his master's money in the ground to preserve it, at which point the master was exceedingly angry. "You should at least have gotten interest on it," the master said to the servant. "What you have will be taken from you and given to those who have brought a profit on my investment. For whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him, and everyone who has will be given more and will have an abundance."

You've undoubtedly heard the story about the three clergymen who confided in each other their method of determining how much of the Sunday offering was theirs and how much was God's. One minister said that she kept one-tenth of the money for herself and gave the rest to God. The second minister said that after the service, he divided it up evenly: one dollar for me, one dollar for God. The third minister said that after the service he took the offering plates into his office, locked the door, and threw the money into the air. Whatever God could catch, she could keep.

Jesus loved a good joke and none is better than this one about the talents. It would have been so remarkably preposterous to elicit at least a chuckle if not a peel of laughter. The talent of Jesus's day was the largest denomination of currency and would have weighed between seventy-five and one hundred thirty-five pounds. Each talent was worth the equivalent of 20 years' wages. Five talents, then, would be a sum—and a weight—so large that the story becomes difficult to comprehend and therefore comical. Jesus' point, however, is as valuable as the talent he used to talk about it: we have been entrusted with much, and are expected to use it wisely—for our own sake, for the sake of the whole community, and for God's sake.

Popular financial advisor and television guru Suze Orman in her book *Nine Steps to Financial Freedom* speaks about this from an economical perspective as well. “Having money,” she says “is like having water from the faucet to drink [when all you have is your hands as a vessel.] If you keep a tight grip on your hands, you won’t get any. You must open your hands for any to stay in your palms if you want a drink.” She goes on to say that she observed in the clients she advised financially that those who opened their hands—and their pocketbooks—by investing in charitable causes often had more money, as counter-intuitive as that seems.

It is easy to fall into the trap of the third servant in this story Jesus told: we want to hoard what we have, we clench a tight fist to hold on to it and ultimately we lose out. Orman comments that regardless of how much money we have, it is the natural tendency of the mind to think that we don’t have enough, our brain telling us there are things I need, or lack or want. But this is precisely the time to give, she says, because we must break the thoughts of poverty, for thoughts of poverty are bonds of poverty, and the invisible chains, that imprison us. We must open our hands to receive and then to give.

The story Jesus gives us is hyperbole, exaggerated and comical to make the point that it isn’t about returning **a part** of what we have, but being responsible with **all** we have. Giving away a portion of our time and money doesn’t excuse us to do whatever we want with the rest. If, out of \$1000 we give away \$500 to the unemployed, but use the remaining \$500 to hire workers at below-poverty wages, we in effect are irresponsible and ultimately miserly. If, however, we give \$100 of that \$1,000 to philanthropic causes and use the rest to pay a fair wage to employees, improve working conditions for them, and treat those who work for us like people rather than paid help, then we begin to approach what Jesus commended in the faithful servants.

The third minister got it right, I think. God doesn’t take anything, but leaves all of the money entrusted to us, as stewards. We are responsible for its disbursement. God left us an unfinished world, a dynamic world continually evolving, a world of wealth to use for the good of all, and calls us to be co-creators in it. God doesn’t take any away from us when we leave it up to God, because God has left it up to us.

While in Ireland several years ago with the church group, I saw a church sign that caught my attention: give what’s right, not what’s left. Suze Orman and Jesus would agree. It isn’t about giving what’s left over, if there is anything left over, for this is giving out of our poverty. It isn’t about hoarding and burying what we have, because ultimately we lose it. Give what’s right, not what’s left, that it may be said of us “well done, good and faithful servant.” Amen.

—Gary L. McCann