We begin a new three-week sermon series this morning entitled, "Thanks-Living: Parables of Stewardship." Today's parable comes from the Gospel writer, Matthew. Matthew is known to talk more than the other gospel writers about final judgment, especially for those who fail to translate words into actions. Most of us find Jesus' parables to be a bit confusing anyway so why add to the confusion by having what sounds like such harsh judgment? For some of us, it's enough to close our Bibles and skip over this parable altogether or to take on a more comfortable interpretation of this parable. But let's not do that. Let's live in the tension for a while. I'm uncomfortable with assigning God the master character in today's parable, hence the reason I stopped at verse 26 in the bulletin. And some scholars have chosen to assign the third slave the role of Jesus. However, when I look at the context here we have the third of three judgment parables in a row. It is a parable that is often taken out of context. For example, some say that it justifies a gospel of economic prosperity; it does not. Others say that Jesus was continuing to tick off the authorities, hence the third slave role. But I wonder in following suit with these other parables if Jesus wasn't trying to continue to make and grow disciples- not waste any precious, remaining time. That's why I am choosing to interpret today's parable with God as the Master. This parable takes place as Jesus makes his way into Jerusalem to face persecution and death on the cross. He knows what's coming and though he's told the disciples; they don't get it. Maybe this is one of those "come to Jesus" talks? We all know that Jesus was and is a champion of the least advantaged. "The Gospels report his advocacy and care for the left out, the pushed down, the little: children, women, the

poor, the sick, the designated sinners. This commitment finds expression in his parables, which often give a celebrated role to an outcast or despised figure- a tax collector, a Samaritan, a widow denied justice, a failed son, etc. The parable before us, however, is a singular exception. Here it is the one with the least who loses" (Paul Simpson Duke, *The Parables).* And reading through Matthew's Gospel, one begins to pick up that most parables likely end with a person or group condemned for being foolish or wicked. One of Matthew's favorite phrases is "weeping and gnashing of teeth." Today's parable appears in both Matthew and Luke's Gospels though they differ quite a bit. In Luke's version it's called the Parable of Pounds, whereas here in Matthew's version it's called the Parable of Talents. Before turning to God's word for us this day, let us first pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I've quoted before a poem, entitled, "The Summer Day," by Mary Oliver. The last line of the poem is posed to the reader as a question: *Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?* As we reflect upon this question, let's look closer at this parable. When thinking of the Gospel of Matthew and this parable, the Sermon on the Mount should come to mind. "That is, what you do with what you have been given is never, ever, for your benefit alone, but for the sake of the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, so that we might actually embody the promise of Immanuel- being the salt of the earth and the light of the world" (Karoline Lewis, www.workingpreacher.org). It's hard when reading this parable not to get caught up in making an economic connection. But this scripture overall is not about the

economy…yes, Jesus uses economic terms metaphorically to look at the bigger picture. And perhaps the bigger picture is about that with which God has entrusted these servants/us and what they/we choose to do with them.

What is a talent, anyway? A talent equaled about 6,000 denarii and weighed anywhere between 80-130 pounds. If one denarius was the daily pay for a common laborer, then **one talent, equaled 20 years' worth of wages. Five talents represented 100 years' worth of wages** (Duke). We're talking big money! Matthew goes big when it comes to assigning wealth, whereas in Luke's version of the parable, everyone gets the same, smaller amount. In Matthew's version the Master gives each servant talents differing amounts according to their ability. Now that doesn't seem fair, does it? At least that's how we've been trained to look at this scenario in our society- we compare ourselves to others- we become jealous when others have more talents than we do- we feel sorry for ourselves- we covet what others have, and join "the grass is always greener on the other side" club. We focus on the talents we see in other people, rather than investing in our own God-given talents. And notice also that the master gives them no instructions. He just leaves them with these large sums of money. In Luke's version the master says, "Do business with these until I come back" (19:13). And then we get to the really uncomfortable part- the master's response to the third slave. Upon first listen, the parable of the Talents, portrays a master whose words and behavior seem far out of character with the God who freed the enslaved Israelites and the Jesus who healed the two blind men on

the side of the road out of compassion (Matt. 20:29-34). However, if you take a second and third reading of this parable, you may begin to notice that the master is most generous, trusting, welcoming, and benevolent. "That is the way the narrator of the parable presents him; that is the way the first two slaves view him- otherwise they would not have been so free to risk and act- and that is the way the master conducts himself. Could it be that the one-talent slave has badly misjudged the master, distorting the master into a tough, uncaring ruler, and has foolishly acted accordingly" (Thomas Long, *Matthew*)?

Maybe that's what I'm intrigued by the third slave? I wonder if it's also because he's the one I relate most to in this story. Yeah, we'd all like to claim that we're always like the first two slaves, trusting that God is enough…that we are enough and thus being willing to risk big. And yet, if I'm honest, it's the third slave who speaks more to me. He's really honest about why he digs a hole and hides his God-given talent. He's afraid. He's afraid of the harshness of the master so he tries to protect what the master gave him by burying the talent in the ground. Though that practice may seem odd to us today, it was actually quite common. But he's acting like the owner instead of the steward. This talent though is not even his- really- and yet, he wants to keep his master's money safe. He's trying to be a loyal servant…to be faithful...to do best by his master. He's afraid though to take the risk- to leap and invest in what he's been given by the master. Instead of rejoicing in and with what God has entrusted him and being fruitful, like the third slave, we go and dig a hole and bury it. We accuse others and insulate ourselves. "Master, I

knew you were a harsh man…reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed" (v. 24). We fool ourselves with our limited perceptions and distrust of the master. We also tell ourselves that the burying method is the safest…that we are being faithful to the master- to keep on digging our holes- when it fact, this is the opposite of faithfulness. The truth still stands: we have one wild and precious life. An amazing gift to us from God. For you see, we are stewards, not owners. God is the one who gives the gifts. I don't know about y'all, but it seems that Jesus' point here is that the worst we can do with what God has given us is NOTHING! We make all these excuses. We say we trust in God's steadfastness and provision but when the rubber meets the road, reality sets in. We keep digging holes and burying our talents. We make excuses. I'm too old. I'm too young. I live on the streets. I'm too busy. I have a family. I'm tired. It's become a habit- a survival mechanism- a bit of denial with a dash of doubt. We limit ourselves. **Fear becomes our master. Money becomes our master.** Something other than God dictates who and whose we are. As harsh as it sounds, choices have consequences. The consequences occur when we don't use what God gives us for others, as God's mission is mercy and justice. In other words, who is going to pay the price for our fear and inaction? The people who are suffering and need mercy and justice.

Friends, "the tragic news of this reading of the parable is that the one-talent man pronounces his own judgment; he gets only the master his tiny and warped vision can see. In theological terms, he gets the peevish

little tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about a generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about living with the consequences of one's own faith. If one trusts the goodness of God and [responds with ThanksLiving,] one can boldly venture out with eyes wide open to the grace in life and can discover the joy of God's providence everywhere" (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew).* Yet, living in bounty, life in the here-and-not yet of God's kingdom on earth, the realm of generous accountability, proves harder than we expect. Faithful risking and trusting in a generous God is hard. "So much has been entrusted to us. Turning away from life, refusing to risk the joy of becoming- this is what leads to the abyss of outer darkness. Here, where regret and disappointment dwell, is much weeping and gnashing of teeth. Each time we banish another of the gifts we have been given, we add to the chasm separating us from the God who is our true home" (Kayla McClurg, *Passage By Passage: A Gospel Journey).*

I listened to an interview this week with Rev. Adam Hamilton, a Methodist Minister who was one of the nine ministers or seminarians elected in the most recent elections. He was elected Senator in Kansas and was being interviewed on Tim Miller's podcast. Miller told Hamilton that he wanted to play a piece of Hamilton's remarks to then President Obama from the 2013 National Prayer Breakfast. Rev. Hamilton listened as his younger self shared the following story: "During Dr. Martin Luther King weekend a few years ago I heard on NPR an interview with Rev. Billy Kyles. Kyles was with Dr. King on the balcony of the Loraine Motel when he died. The interviewer asked the Reverend what he'd be

preaching that weekend, and Billy told a story you've undoubtedly heard before, but one that bears repeating. He said, "I'll be telling the old story told about Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson, the nineteenth-century author, once told how as a boy he'd been sitting in the window, nose pressed against the glass in rapt attention as the lamplighter came to light the gas street lamps. Climbing up and down the ladder in the darkness, he would light one street lamp after another. It was a fascinating sight to a little boy. His father walked in the room, and seeing how intently his son was looking out the window asked, "Son, what are you looking at?" To which the young Stevenson replied, "Father, I'm watching the man out there knock holes in the darkness." "There's a lot of darkness in the world. Lead us, Mr. President, to be a compassionate people, concerned for the marginalized. And, when you feel your lowest, don't give up. Rather, wait upon the Lord and he will renew your strength, so that you might lead us to knock holes in the darkness" (link). This is probably more relevant now than it was in 2013. This is what the mission is from Jesus- to poke holes in the darkness through the use of our God-given gifts. Being the salt of the earth and the light of the world really, really matters" (Lewis). When tempted with burying, I hope you dance! Go and enter into the joy of your Master. And as the late theologian Rev. Howard Thurman said, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive." What gifts has God called you to steward? Just do it! Like faith, it's all that easy and it's all that hard. Thanks be to God! Amen.