<Judges 4:1-7; Psalm 123:1-4; Matthew 25:14-30>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

It can be challenging, sometimes, for our minds to grasp the concept and magnitude of large sums of money, particular on the exponential scale. I’m always fascinated, and occasionally horrified, by snapshots that help us break things down to a day-by-day concept. For instance: in trying to grasp the concept of what a trillion dollars is worth, if you started with that amount of money at the same time Cleopatra was queen of Egypt and spent one million dollars a day, each and every day, then on today’s date you would still own more than two billion dollars. That’s how massive an amount is one trillion.

Our minds struggle to comprehend quantities and amounts on such scales, so when they’re used in parables, as is the in case our reading this morning from Matthew’s gospel, the sums themselves are meant to represent overly large amounts. This is sometimes tricky for us to grasp in our modern day, particularly when the currency is not one we are familiar with. For instance, one talent represented approximately fifteen years’ worth of wages. According to today’s minimum wage amount, then, one talent would equal about a quarter-million dollars, or just over $226,000.

But again, it’s not necessarily about the exact amounts; I was curious to explore that because I wanted all of us to have a better chance to hear this parable in the same way that the disciples heard it from Jesus, but it’s not about the amount, itself. The parable is used to exaggerate in order to shift our focus on to the deeper meaning, to open up our perspective by starting with something so outrageous to conceive that we are then able to grasp the true lesson a little bit easer. That is, of course, if we are first able to get past our potential awe over the outrageous.

But remember, this parable is not actually about the best rates for return on investment. By using sums of money which the disciples were likely to never see or receive in their lifetimes, Jesus wants them to hear, appreciate, and learn something more, something deeper, and this is where the parable still speaks to us today. But perhaps looking a bit more at our first reading from the Book of Judges will help prime our minds for this ultimate lesson for our lives of faithful living.

In looking at these verses from chapter four of Judges, we are really only getting the opening of the story, because it will go on to so much more. In fact, this is another one of those occasions where I would encourage you to go home this afternoon and open your Bibles to read the entire chapter, along with chapter five after it. But our reading this morning opens with the historical update that Israel has wandered and strayed from serving God, and has now been conquered and ruled by the Canaanites for twenty years.

Remember our reading last week from the end of Joshua, wherein Joshua gathered all the peoples of all the tribes and had them recommit to serving the Lord by issuing the ultimatum to each household? Remember his words to them, “choose this day whom you will serve…”? And do you remember their response, that they were determined to choose and serve the Lord? Well, that has not necessarily gone well. They have strayed from this proclamation and have, in fact, served interests other than YHWH God, and as Joshua promised, God in turn handed them over to conquest and foreign rule. The first three chapters of the Book of Judges chronicle this new pattern of judges being raised up to guide the people, particularly in the times when they have been wayward. And as we take up the story with our reading this morning, the people of Israel have been under foreign rule for twenty years.

Now, as I alluded to, there is much more to how this story plays out than what we see in our brief reading this morning and the introduction of Deborah as the ruling judge. But one thing that is worth highlighting: via Deborah, sitting under the tree of judgment named for her and her capability, the command of God to the general, Barak, is to take ten thousand soldiers.

Ten thousand, only, against a Canaanite army that numbered many times that number. Again, as we look to these stories, we find numbers that might boggle our understanding to comprehend. In this case, however, the numbers are actual, and show forth a dual purpose to the people who seek to be faithful, or to return in faith, to God: that God is truly the One to provide, above and beyond human capabilities, and that God can do much with little, even beyond what we think might be possible or even practical. This example, this reminder of God’s power and capability, itself has two purposes. The first is to remind the people who have strayed what God is capable of, and the second is the example to the people of how they should live in faith - actively and participatory.

And it is this lesson which we can take and bring with us as we return to our parable from Matthew’s gospel: the calling of the life of active faith is one which includes active participation in the use of gifts received.

We can easily become hung up on trying to comprehend the amount and worth of the talents, or on the nature of the Master, or even the weighted capability of the three servants. Rather, it is what is done with the gifts entrusted that becomes the lesson of this parable, and that can be reduced to either doing something, actively, or doing nothing, passively.

In this light, this parable pairs with the one which precedes it, which we looked at last week; the parable of the ten bridesmaids, five of whom were foolish and five of whom were wise. The wise ones were the ones who recognized the role and responsibility they had and acted accordingly, who took a participatory role and ensured that they were ready. This parable, now, follows in the same vein, emphasizing to the disciples - and to us, who hear it again now two-thousand-some years later - that the life of faith is

one in which we both trust God, and trust our ability to use the gifts that have been entrusted to us.

For who of us has not received good and amazing gifts, to be used in faithful living? We each have. We have seen the truth of this in an almost uncountable number of examples: those who offer time and ability with mission endeavors such as Habitat for Humanity or Ride for Roswell or donating to any one of the supply drives we have done as a congregation. We have seen gifts being put to faithful use through music offered for worship, not only through our choir and our Director of Music Ministries but also through handbells and children’s choir and special music of voice or instrument. We have seen gifts put to use through all the occasions in which we have offered time and energy, whether that be for teaching Sunday School or Adult Discussion, or serving on a committee, or staying after worship to help clean our building and campus. Even this morning we elect new individuals who have agreed to dedicate their time and energy to serve as officers, ensuring the ministries of our congregation. And all of this continues to merely tap the surface of the potential of what could be done.

The amount of value we have to actively invest and spend is almost unspeakable.

We know that we have such gifts within us, and while financial gifts are included in that category it is so much more than just our finances. Much in the way nearly-incalculable amounts are used in parables to portray amounts without end, so too are the gifts we have received from God. Our calling in faith is to, indeed, put those good gifts to use for the sake of and in the work of realizing God’s Kingdom within our world, not just on occasion but in all times and ways possible. We see, through Deborah and Barak, what God can do with a smaller amount, and we are reminded in the parable of the talents to actively follow in faith in the way that we live. What more, then, do we need? Let us continue to live out the calling to discipleship we have received, and in gratitude to praise the One who has gifted us in the first place. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)