

Sunday, November 13, 2011: Matthew 25:14-30

by [Mark Labberton](#) in the [November 1, 2011](#) issue

Being a pastor for 30 years has given me the chance to see both the gifts and the weaknesses of people up close. This vantage point sometimes makes mine one of the weirdest vocations as well as a rewarding one. My breath has been taken away by joy and by shame. It's the story of talents and tyrants told again and again.

The classic interpretation of Matthew's parable focuses on the importance of investing our talents (a word that in fact comes into English usage as a consequence of this parable). Read this way, the point of the story is the importance of growing the

talents or gifts the master entrusts to us. Our response may involve risk, but fruitfulness is the goal. In this interpretation, the one-talent steward demonstrates a failure of faith as well as a failure of fruit-bearing. He is the fool and the rest are wise.

We focus on the accountability of the one who squanders what he was to have used and multiplied. Jesus regularly rebukes the wealthy and especially the religiously privileged for this. Fear and self-interested righteousness can lead one to bury the gift.

The inspiring part of the parable came earlier: the entrusting of talents, the multiplication of those resources and the granting of blessings. That's how many of us read this parable: as a call to flourishing and blessing. What's not to like? It's what our abundant-life hopes are all about. The interpretation hooks us. Work hard, invest your talents, yield a 100 percent return and get the blessing! It's a portrait of proverbial wisdom writ large and pain free.

But if you opt out by taking the talent and burying it, if you live in fear and self-protection, you'll lose big. You'll lose not only the growth of the talents but also the blessing of appreciation. This loss is far greater than the potential failure of risking the talent. Take the risk! You will gain your life by laying it down, giving it away.

One of the great joys of being a pastor is in being a cheerleader for faithful risk. It's a privilege to encourage people on the basis of this and other texts. God has given you gifts, I tell people. Invest them with freedom and hope.

In dramatic contrast, a second interpretation of this parable leads me to think more about tyrants than talents. Here the emphasis falls on the master. His illegal gain is named for what it is, and his harsh, demanding greed is exposed by the only one who refuses to be co-opted. In this reading, the master and his hyperproductive minions are the fools, while the one-talent steward who pays the price for whistle-blowing is the wise one.

This reading asks whose voices matter in a world rife with power abuse. If we focus on the accountability of the master, we see him exposed in his corruption even though he has been powerful and successful. At the same time, the bold words of the one-talent steward result in a public accountability that's not specified within the parable but implied by the teaching of Jesus.

Here, living faithfully means naming the reality of abusive power or standing with one who is not cowering but bold and ready to suffer the consequences of being bold. This is the ministry of standing by. As a pastor, I encourage others to stand by: to be bold or steadfast in family interventions, in board confrontations, in complicated friendships, in personnel dynamics, in workplace politics and in public debates.

Both readings emphasize accountability; both readings are about squandering talent because of a tyrant. In one case the tyrant is the steward's fear. Burying even one talent squanders opportunity, allowing the tyranny of fear to trump all else. In the other reading, a master who abuses power squanders the potential and freedom of the steward.

In our trust that Jesus is Lord, we find strength to confront tyrants without being a tyrant or falling prey to one. We are invited to a full and fruit-bearing life that is open, expansive and hopeful. This is the vision of human flourishing that neither the fearful steward nor the dominating master experience.

The multivalent approach to this text reminds me that pastoral ministry is a multivalent approach to life. I need help with life's both/and as much or more than I've needed help with either/or. The classic reading may be stronger, but each reading serves a need in the complex world of talents. Temptations and distractions

exist on every side for different reasons. The kingdom of rightly ordered power that comes near us in Jesus sets us free from tyranny and directs us to life abundant. That good news may unbury our talent or give us our voice—either way it is a witness to a God who gives good gifts.