

SERMON DELIVERED AT HOLY GHOST ANGLICAN CHURCH ON 16 NOVEMBER
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Today you heard "The Parable of the Talents." We use the word "talent" a lot in common language. Andrea Bocelli is SO talented. Russell Crowe is SO talented. But in the context of Scripture, a "talent" meant the equivalent of the amount of money a person would earn over several years. The Scripture experts differ on the exact number of years, but at least it is several. That means that each of these men in this parable received a pretty decent chunk of money.

In this parable, there are some interesting things going on. First, each man received a different amount. Two of them made some wise financial decisions.

And notice that one made a lot more than the other. But the master was equally happy with both of them. Each took initiative and did the best they could with what was given to them.

Another interesting thing here is that the third fellow did nothing with the money he got. He buried it. He was afraid to take a chance. And the comment at the end of the parable, in no uncertain terms, the master did not take too kindly to that.

As with all parables, though, there is a second meaning here.

In our case, God does not establish a certificate of deposit at the Banca d'Italia or at Barclay's when we are born. That would be nice, but things don't work that way.

So in our lives, "talent" has come to mean the particular abilities or skills we have. We say that someone has a talent for music or cooking or business or teaching. God entrusts each of us with very unique talents. It is the pool of the talent of everyone that makes the world a good place to live.

But "The Parable of the Talents" isn't only about money or ability. It's about something even more important. "The Parable of the Talents" is about recognizing our abilities as Christians and trusting God enough to make the bold step to use those talents. We may even call it "taking risks."

It makes no difference that we have five talents, or 2 talents, or one talent. The important thing is that we use those talents even if it involves taking a risk.

What are Christian talents? Serving others, exhorting those for whom we are responsible in the ways of God, working at a homeless shelter or a food bank, speaking words of wisdom to those who are in need of you to share your personal experience with God, listening to someone and knowing when you don't really need to speak because they just need an ear full of love, leading a Bible study, showing mercy and kindness to people like the homeless man who lives in the Piazza Corvetto, the time you spent helping the victims of the floods here in Genova.

The French scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin sums it up nicely in his book "The Divine Milieu." He writes: "God obviously has no need of the products of your busy activity since he could give himself everything without you. The only thing that concerns him, the only thing he desires intensely, is your faithful use of your freedom and the preference you accord him over the things around you. Try to grasp this: the things that are given to you on earth are given to you purely as an exercise, a 'blank sheet' on which you make your own mind and heart. You are on a testing ground where God can judge whether you are capable of being translated to heaven and into his presence. You are on trial so that it matters very little what becomes of the fruits of the earth, or what they are worth. The whole question is whether you have learned how to obey and how to love."

The parable of the talents leaves us with an unanswered question. How would the master have responded to the first two servants if they had not brought in a profit? What if they had put the money at risk and come back empty handed?

I think the master would have accepted them. After all, in the parable what he commends is not their profits, but their faithfulness and that they took a risk.

You know, modern day stories of people taking risks help to inspire us. One that I thought about while I was preparing this sermon was the true story about a man I used to know who worked for the company I used to work for for 37 years, Bank of America. It is one of the largest banks in the world. George Cherrie was an executive vice president in charge of the bank's audit department. He was on the Bank's board of directors. I'm sure that even 20 years ago, his annual salary and benefits reached into the millions. He traveled the world for the Bank, had a sumptuous home on Nob Hill in San Francisco. Sometimes Nob Hill is referred to as "Snob Hill". George ate at the finest restaurants. When he reached age 50, there was a story about George in our management news magazine. George was resigning his job so he could join the Franciscan Order in the RC Church. He gave away everything he owned so that he could work for the poorest of the poor in San Francisco. Brother George is now in his late 70s and he's still doing it.

We can learn from our failures, and often it is failure that provides the most indelible lessons. But fear teaches us nothing – until we leave it behind.

What we want to hear at life's end is "Well done, good and trustworthy servant. You have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."