

Five Plus Five Equals Eleven

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Matthew 25:14-30

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“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money. ¹⁹After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ ²¹His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²²And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ ²³His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.’ ²⁴Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ ²⁶But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter?’ ²⁷Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’



11-11-11 was quite a day. Besides being Veterans’ Day in the US, news reports tell us that there were some quirky things celebrated on that day when “a lineup of digits at 11 minutes past the 11th hour on 11/11/2011 marks a moment that won't repeat for 100 years.”

- There was a spike in lottery ticket sales with that strange little number
- In Windsor, Wis., twins Betsy and Katie Overman blew out 11 candles each and opened 11 gifts on their 11th birthday on the 11th day of the 11th month, 11 years into the 21st century.
- Matchmaker Steve Ward performed 11 wedding ceremonies and observed a moment of silence for veterans at 11:11 a.m. at the Crowne Plaza Times Square Hotel in New York.
- Tania Gabrielle, a practitioner of numerology in Los Angeles, said the date was a good time to start money-making ventures or relationships.
- In Las Vegas, 3,200 marriage licenses were awaiting pickup Thursday, three times more than normal. “There's been nothing like it since 7/7/2007; 4,333 licenses that week,” said Clark County clerk Diana Alba.

On Friday, 11-11-11, Egypt's Great Pyramid of Giza, was closed to visitors. Authorities faced what some feared would be its biggest threat yet: “two crystals, a ‘ceremony of love’ and several hundred ‘human angels’ seeking to form a protective shield around the earth.” Ah, yes, the secret ceremony of love – who wouldn’t want to see that?

Newspaper reports said that there were Masonic rituals planned for inside the pyramid at the 11th minute of the 11th hour, on the 11th day of the 11th month in the 11th year of the new millennium. It all started when a single meditation ceremony was being planned by a Polish organization who claimed that their activities would

help save the earth from cosmic catastrophe and then it quickly mushroomed into something larger, with organizations as diverse as the "Universal Kabbalah Network" and the "11.11.11 Gathering of Souls" announcing that they too would be converging on the pyramid to hug, worship or simply climb inside the structure to be healed by the sacred power within, and one newspaper reported there would be an attempt at placing a Jewish Star of David atop the pyramid itself.

My goodness, what an alignment of numbers can do to us!

And, *of course*, every 11-11 is National Corduroy Appreciation Day due to the date's resemblance to the vertical lines of corduroy fabric. But this year was proclaimed "the most important date in history" by The Corduroy Appreciation Club and the club was planning on finding an 11-year-old child who would turn 11 on 11-11 to crown him or her "the messiah of corduroy." Did you wear your corduroy that day?

"But what's all that have to do with the parable of the talents,?" you ask.

Jesus tells the story like this: "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away."

I thought that in the midst of today's political debate mishaps we might refer to this as God's 5-5-5 economic plan or perhaps God's 3 point organizational plan – but I can't quite remember the third point – *oops*.

The man goes on his journey and leaves each of his servants a number of talents. A "talent" was originally an ancient unit for measuring mass which later took on monetary value. That infamously accurate research tool known as Wikipedia says: "The Babylonians, Sumerians, and Hebrews divided a talent into 60 mina, each of which was subdivided into 60 shekels. The

Greeks also used the ratio of 60 mina to one talent. A Greek mina was approximately 434 ± 3 grams. A Roman talent was 100 libra. A libra is exactly three quarters of a Greek mina, so a Roman talent is 1.25 Greek talents." Sheesh ... no wonder the Greeks and Italians are having economic meltdowns today if you have to convert everything like that! (What's a Grecian urn anyway? Depends on how many hours he works.)

The talent is also used elsewhere in the Bible when the book of Exodus describes the building of the tabernacle which would hold the commandments which God gave to Moses, a particular number of "talents" was to be invested in the offering as the tabernacle was being built. And both Chronicles and 1 Kings tell us that Solomon was to receive 666 gold talents a year. (Pity it wasn't 1,111 talents a year – that would have played nicely here.)

Back to the parable. One receives 5 talents, one receives 2 talents, one receives 1 talent. The one with the 5 talents and the one with the 2 talents took theirs to the market place and traded them wisely so that in the end each doubled his talents. The one with 1 talent, though, buried that talents because he was afraid that he would get in trouble if he risked his master's talent so he dug a hole and hid it in the ground. On his return, that master asks about the talents he has distributed. The one who had 5 plus the extra 5 is praised; the one who had 2 plus the extra 2 is complimented as well; but the one who didn't risk was condemned.

What's wrong with this story?

This week I asked some friends about this parable and told them of my sermon title – *Five Plus Five Equals Eleven*. "What do you think it means?" I asked. One said it's "things that don't add up" – hmm, well, that's not bad – I could make that preach. Another asked "with mathematical abilities like that should we really let the pastor be involved in our stewardship campaign this year?" And another asked "what's wrong with simply returning to the master what you started out with?"

This third friend is involved in planning and managing trust funds for people. Now, that sounds like it might involve big money, but for him it doesn't. He works primarily with people with disabilities who have to live off trust money set aside for them by parents or others who wanted to give those people some security for the future. This person's responsibility is to manage those funds as carefully and wisely as possible so that they help create a better life for the beneficiary – and often, he said, it involves a relatively small pool of money, maybe \$20,000 that a family has been able to set aside for this purpose. This manager – like the servants in the parable – has been given the responsibility of stewarding this money – these talents – so they survive. He invests them conservatively and the funds continue on – if he takes more risk in investing the trust fund, he and his client might earn more money but they also might lose everything they have which would not be a good outcome. Is it wrong to bury your money in the field? If at the beginning that trust fund has \$20,000 and at the end it still has \$20,000, didn't the manager do his or her job?

Rabbinic law stipulated that burying was the best safeguard against theft and that when one buries entrusted money one is free from liability for it. The one talent person has been prudent and proudly presents the one talent to the returning master.

So this conservative approach isn't so bad sometimes. But thinking about that example made me realize that that's not the primary learning that this parable is pointing to. It's not simply about money – it's not a 5-5-5 financial plan. It's really about you – and me – about each of us as “servants of a master/mistress,” if you will, or each of us as children of a God who gives us all that we have and need. The parable reminds us that we can choose to be simply faithful – bury and hide our talents – or we can choose to take some risks and by those risks grow even greater resources.

The word “talent” started as a unit of measurement, true, but because of this parable of Jesus, the word took on a different meaning – this parable is the origin of the sense of the word “talent” meaning “gift or skill” as we use it in English.

On the one hand, one servant receives 5 talents. And in the other hand, he earns five more. (I feel like that “world's greatest spokesperson” in those funny Nationwide Insurance television commercials as he makes shadow puppets on the wall. “And on the other hand ...” as a third hand pops up.) On the one hand he receives 5 talents, gifts, skills, resources; on the other hand he receives 5 more because he has used the first 5 wisely; and on the third hand, he gets 1 more when the master takes the 1 that was buried and gives it to the one with 5 + 5. Five plus five equals ... eleven.

And you thought things didn't add up!

What God has given each one of us, Jesus reminds us, is not just 1 and not just 2 talents – God gives us each 5 talents – 100 gifts – 1,000 skills – however you want to think of it. Each one of us has been given the same blessings and gifts as every other child of God. How do we choose to use them?

What this parable does, like every other parable of Jesus, is challenge the status quo – it shakes up the usual order of things and pushes us beyond our comfort level. The parable disrupts business as usual, but it does so by recommending risk rather than timid caution.

Matthew places this parable as the conclusion of three parables that affirm that the return of Christ would be delayed but that it was certain – remember, the Gospels are written primarily in the 1st Century and followers were beginning to question why Jesus hadn't “returned” yet – and then these parables advise proper behavior in the interim. The time before the return of Jesus is to be used responsibly. And Matthew also places this parable in Jesus' mouth while he is on the Mount of Olives – two days later he would be crucified – he is not acting conservatively at this point – he is taking the ultimate risk because it is what God wants of him. In multiplying the gifts given to him, Jesus risks it all and doubles

or triples or quadruples what God gave him – though that meant he had to risk and, in fact, gave his life for that to happen.

Will you? Maybe not literally give your life, but will you give your life? At the point where people have been reduced to the point of having nothing to lose, a different option becomes thinkable: leaving the old social, political, and economic system altogether and letting the cards fall where they may. But that then begs the question: even if you are not at the point where you have nothing to lose, will you still take the risk that Jesus calls you to live out in your life with your talents?

“According to this parable,” wrote Perkins School of Theology professor Alyce MacKenzie, “we are to take what ability and power we have been given and use them to increase the influence of God's kingdom on earth. God's power is different from that of a wealthy aristocrat. The parable of the judgment that follows the parable of the talents makes this clear. We further God's purposes not by being an agent of those who have more in exploiting those who have less. On the contrary, we risk seeing Jesus in the poor and the exploited; we risk pouring out our abilities and influence on their behalf.”

And that is exactly what Jesus was contemplating on the Mount of Olives two days before he risks it all.

Stewardship. Today we kick-off our 2012 stewardship Campaign, “A Full Measure.” So the question should be blatantly in front of us. Where are you using your talents? Where and how and for whom are you using your time, your energy, your space, and, yes, your money. Are you burying your talents? That maintains them, sure, but God calls us to risk it all so that God's reign is proclaimed in our midst. God requires us to push past boundaries and lean forward into a different way of living.

Today we celebrate a baptism – a wonderful moment in the life of the Church when we recognize that there is another member of the body of Christ. And I realized as I thought about what was

happening here is that a baptism involves some funny math as well. $1 \text{ parent} + 1 \text{ parent} = 3$ at the baptismal font. That's the mathematical formula for followers of Jesus – for anyone baptized in the waters of love that he pours on us. And so also is it the formula for using our talents. $5 \text{ talents} + 5 \text{ talents} = 11 \text{ talents}$ when all is said and done.

Use your talents, your gifts, your skills – all of which come from God – in such a way that the sum of them all is greater than one plus one. Live out that reality as you prayerfully consider your financial commitment for the coming year.

Amen.