

I have my own feelings about this challenging gospel text but a popular preacher, Anna Carter Florence, has reworked Jesus parable of the Buried Talents into a form that for me explains it the way it should be understood.

“A man – let’s call him Jesus – was going on a journey. He called his slaves – let’s call them disciples – to him, and entrusted the gospel to them. To one, he gave stories; to another, he gave compassion; to a third, he gave the bread of life and the cup of salvation. There were other disciples who got other things, but we’ll concentrate on these three. Then Jesus went away.

The disciple who got the stories went out and told them, and soon there were five other disciples telling those stories. The disciple who received compassion went out and offered compassion to someone else, and that person became a disciple, too, and she went on to give that compassion to others as well. But the disciple who had been given the bread of life and the cup of salvation dug a hole in the ground and buried them.

After a long time Jesus came back and he asked his disciple to come and tell him what they had done with what he had given to them. The first two disciples told him about the stories and the compassion, and they introduced the new disciples, and those disciples introduced still other disciples that they had made. Jesus was very pleased. “Well done, good and trustworthy disciples,” he said to them. “You have been trustworthy in a few things, and now I will trust you with many things. Enter into my joy!”

Then it was the third disciple’s turn. The third disciple told Jesus, “Master, I knew you were a harsh man. I knew you reaped where you didn’t sow and gathered where you didn’t scatter seed. I was afraid – of messing up, of not getting the theology right, of what you’d do to me if I did – so I went and hid the bread of life and the cup of salvation in the ground. Here, you can have it back.”

But Jesus replied, “You wicked and lazy disciple! You knew, did you, that ‘I reap where I do not sow and gather where I do not scatter’? Well, if you were sure of that, you at least should have taken the bread of life and the cup of salvation to the church and let them

figure out what to do with it! Then when I came back, at least we would have some broken bread and those baskets full of leftovers!”

Jesus continued, “Take the bread and the cup away from this disciple and give it to one of the others. For all those who have the good news, even more will be given to them. But from those who have nothing – because they have buried my gospel in the ground – even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless disciple, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth! Then, bring him back to church next Sunday and we’ll start again.”

To me, this is a wonderful, understandable way to interpret this very difficult story. But it may leave some of you unsatisfied.

For instance – it may be that our treasurer and congregational president would rather have me make this about stewardship and our financial gifts to the work of the congregation. After all, the church always needs money – in this congregation we have fallen short of our expected giving this year. The church leaders at the annual meeting in February presented a budget that actually included anticipated giving

at a lower level than the year before and yet we are not meeting that expectation. Certainly in this text the message is true that we belong to God and God expects a return from us. God has saved us, not just so we can go to heaven when we die, but so that we can be a blessing to others. So the message from the standpoint of money is that God has given us all we have and so God expects a fair return for that work of salvation. I could ask the question “what kind of dividends are you paying? If everyone in this congregation contributed in the same proportions as you, would we be further along or even further behind? I could ask those questions. But I did not choose to emphasize that message this morning.

I probably am disappointing our nominating committee too because it is evident that there is a distinct play on words here in this text – at least in English. A *talent* in Jesus’ time was an amount of money – in fact it was a very large amount of money. It was many years’ worth of wages. And so the Master has entrusted these slaves with a great deal of money.

But in our modern day, a *talent* is also something that we do, something that, at the very least, we may feel personally good at and which may be recognized by others as a particular gift as well – a talent. And of course, the church is always looking for new talent; for people willing to preach/teach/ administrate/serve/lead. Our Christian Education Director is probably disappointed with me this morning because I am not preaching about the need for Sunday School teachers and Adult Forum leaders. Our FMF coordinators are probably disappointed that I am not preaching about the fact that we fell short of the number of talented people we needed last week for Families Moving Forward. Now don't get me wrong – there were and are many people who put forward their best abilities to make these and other programs happen in this congregation. But last week a few people did double and triple duty, cooking, cleaning up, sleeping overnight, serving breakfast. They had to tap their talents and energy in new ways to serve the 4 or 5 families we had staying here, because there were not enough people willing to step forth and serve. There were not enough people willing to share their talents. I am probably

disappointing the people here who are always looking for new talent because I am not preaching on talents this morning.

And I am probably disappointing the capitalists in our midst as well. After all, this is a perfect text for major investors, for people who use money to make more money. It justifies their lifestyle, it says “It takes money to make money and the more successful you are at it, the happier the master will be!” Five years ago, in the depth of the economic downturn, Warren Buffet purchased the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad. Who buys railroads anymore? But Buffet did. And it was an expensive, risky purchase. I am sure that many in his employment wondered if he had lost it. But now the BNSF railroad accounts for 11% of the profits of his Berkshire Hathaway co. The oil boom in North Dakota (who could have predicted an oil boom in North Dakota) and the lack of any kind of pipelines through that area has made the second richest man in the world even richer. He was willing to take a risk, a calculated one for sure, but a risk all the same, to invest in an important part of the

economy of this nation, and it has paid off more than perhaps even he expected.

The Lord's Table suggests investment. But it is another kind of investment than what Buffet does. The Lord's Table suggests a thanksgiving of abundance, an economy that the first two slaves hint at; giving and trading so talents increase for the benefit of many. At the Lord's Table, the bread and cup runs over. No matter how many are gathered for the feast, there is always room for more. The bread and wine of the Eucharist are not commodities to be hoarded or buried, but gifts to be shared.

Therefore, if the capitalists were hoping for a sermon that would justify increasing their wealth in the name of the Lord, than I have disappointed them as well.

So if I am not preaching about giving more, or sharing your talents more, or making more money, than what is this text about?

It is of course about fear verses abundance. We live too much of our lives caught up in the fear of not having enough, not being enough, not doing enough. The parable contrasts those who faced risk

and uncertainty and acted anyway, with those who faced the same but cowered in fear.

Each of us has faced a task that involved weighing the risks of going in one direction or the other. Those who take their responsibilities seriously want to make the most of an opportunity. The Lord's Table suggests another kind of economy, another kind of giving and sharing, another kind of investment, one governed not by the fear of scarcity, but by the thanksgiving of abundance. The bread and wine of the Eucharist, the gifts of story and song, the influence of compassion and love, are not commodities to be hoarded but gifts to be shared. God gives of God's very self in Jesus and those who receive these gifts are meant to be caught up in the same act and practice of giving gifts that are not depleted. Whereas scarcity leaves us trapped in fear, abundance is contagious as giving takes root in lives caught up by the master's words.

Jesus responded strongly to the slave caught up in fear' "Take the bread and the cup away from this disciple and give it to one of the others. For all those who have the good news, even more will be



given to them. But from those who have nothing – because they have buried my gospel in the ground – even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless disciple, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!

**Then, bring him back to church next Sunday and we'll start again.” Amen**