

Matthew 25:14-30

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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“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.

The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then 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.’ His 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.’

And 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.’ His 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.’

Then 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; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’ But 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? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For 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. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

Last week, the British dancer, David Toole, died at the age of 56. In a video clip of one of his performances, we see him peer through a window at a group of dancers as they're rehearsing. Impulsively, he opens the door to the studio and enters, moves smoothly across the floor to one of the dancers, takes her by the hand, and they begin an impromptu pas de deux, swooping and gliding and twirling across the floor. When they finish, she leaves him to resume her barre exercises, and he simply exits the room the same way that he entered. I'll post the video clip on our Facebook page so that you can watch it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NShJJr1ztkM>

It's a beautiful, graceful piece of dancing, but with one, unusual element: David Toole had no legs. He was born with a congenital defect that required double-amputation as a very young child. He went to schools for children with disabilities, eventually got a job with the postal service, but, as a young adult, he began slipping slowly into hopelessness and alcoholism, until a friend suggested he attend a dance workshop. That seems random and kind of ridiculous, but there, he discovered a gift for movement. With his long, powerful arms, enormous hands, and innate sense of grace, he performed works of incredible beauty. Eventually, he was the star of the opening ceremonies of the London Olympics. Who would have imagined such a life for someone like him? Yet, as the New York Times headline said of him, he had "grace in his hands."¹

I think about those three servants in the parable, when the master places the talents in their hands. Five talents to the first, two talents to the second, and then one, measly talent to the final servant. Mostly, it's that last servant I think of, staring at that leftover change. The others had something real to work with, but him? I can see why he didn't hop on the phone to his broker. Would it even be worth the risk? It was so little to begin with; and lose it, he'd have nothing. So he buried it in the ground like a dead thing, and what he gained was even worse than nothing at all—it was anger, isolation, and misery.

I don't love this story, because it feels so unfair; but in that, it is true-to-life. We do not all start with the same things. For that matter, each of us, at different *times* in our lives, is given different things to work with. Sometimes, we may have resources and opportunities galore. Other times, like 2020, we open our fingers and see nothing but a big, steaming handful of something I can't say in worship. But

¹ Richard Sandomir, "David Toole, Disabled Dancer With Grace in His Hands, Dies at 56" (The New York Times, November 10, 2020) <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/david-toole-disabled-dancer-with-grace-in-his-hands-dies-at-56.html>

it's what we've been given. We can shake our fist and scream, we can curl into a ball and cry—and believe me, I've done all those things—but it is what we've been given. And according to this parable, we aren't supposed to just bury ourselves in the ground until it's all over. Instead, there is something to be used here—something to be gained.

I think of David Toole, and the hand he was dealt. Sure seems like he started with nothing—but look what he came out with. The headline of the Times' obituary reads: “David Toole: Disabled Dancer with Grace in His Hands, Dies at 56”; but I question the label, “Disabled.” I have two legs, and I was told once that I dance like Betty Rubble. Not a compliment, by the way.

We get so focused on what we don't have—like that final servant, who didn't have *five* talents, or two—that we miss what we do have. David Toole didn't have legs, but he had *grace in his hands*.

A couple of months ago, on top of everything else that was happening, someone damaged one of our chapel windows—the Christ window in the middle, the central focal point that greets you each time you walk through the chapel doors. I remember my sense of impatience and irritation, as Laura and I examined the holes in the window, and the shards of colored glass scattered across the wood floor. It was so senseless and unnecessary, especially when the year had given us so many other challenges to deal with, already.

But then, as the Invitation and Integration Team and then the session started talking about what to do next, there was a moment of realizing that this was an opportunity—not one we had sought, but an opportunity, nonetheless. In addition to the pandemic, this has also been a year of racial reckoning, and a year of looking back on our own history as a congregation. Through other times of struggle, this congregation has been transformed into a champion of racial justice—but our windows still tell the story of whiteness. This was a chance, in a small way, to begin to change to a truer story—a story that reflects more of the truth of the historical Jesus; and more of the truth of God's welcome into a family in which people of every color belong.

And so, while the window is away being restored, it will also go through a transformation. When it returns, Christ will smile on us with the sun-kissed tones of the Middle East, and the two cherubs that hover on either side of his head will be different colors—one with the cool, pale skin of Europe, the other with the dark,

rich tones of Africa. It's not a lot, but it's a beginning—a small investment in the multi-cultured future to which God calls us.

This is not a year we would have asked for, and the challenges of this year will extend well beyond 2020. Furthermore, this year hasn't hit each of us in the same way. Some of us are more financially cushioned from the impact than others, while others are on the verge of eviction. Some of us have supportive partners and families at home—with the added stress of *lots* of togetherness. Others of us are by ourselves—with the added stress of loneliness. Some of us can safely shelter-in-place. Others of us have to be out in the midst of daily exposure, and pray for the best.

We do not hold the same things in our hands. But if there is good news in this parable, it is this: first, we are not expected to give out of something we *don't* have. After all, the master did not expect the same returns from the servant with two talents as from the servant with five. So if you are depleted this year, you don't have to pretend to be brimming with abundance.

Second, there is something to be gained from whatever it is we're holding, if we'll just find a way to use it. After all, *both* of the servants who took the risk of investing their coins, made a profit.

So, what *is* in your hands? It's different for all of us, and it may not be anything we asked for; but it's something. Somewhere in whatever this year has handed you, is an opportunity for creativity, for transformation, for growth; because whatever it is we're holding, underneath it, we all have grace in our hands. The challenge is to find a way to open our fists, and dance with it.