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“Proper Translations: Finding the Right Words”

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Matthew 25:14–30

A missionary had worked in Africa for many years. He labored there single-handedly even though the need for additional help was great. Finally another colleague was sent to assist him. It was a young man who had just graduated from seminary. This fellow had won every academic award in his class. However he arrived at the mission field not able to speak the language because he had been rushed out to help the old missionary.

The local people and their leaders assembled to meet the newcomer and bid him welcome. When the young man had an opportunity to speak to the gathered crowd, he began rather pompously, “We must always remember that there is the eternal gospel and the temporary manifestation thereof.” He stopped to let his older colleague translate for him.

“Friends,” the missionary said in the native language, “he says he’s glad to see everybody!”

As important as it is to speak what is true, it may be more essential to say what is fitting and kind. Proverbs says, “A word **fitly spoken** is like apples of gold in a setting of silver” (Proverbs 25:11).

Sometimes I forget how powerful words can be, for good or ill. Words can reveal and they can hide. They can simplify and they can confuse. They can hurt and they can heal. They can create intimacy and they can build walls of alienation. They can stir the soul and they can paralyze the body. If you have any doubt about the power of words, just ask a parent who, waiting up in the wee hours of the morning, gets a phone call and hears the words, “Momma, I’m OK.”

As powerful as words can be, we have a divided mind about words and their power. We hear both sides in commonly used aphorisms: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me.” And, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” We live in a society where information is absolutely critical and, at the same time, we are drowning in information overload. Which side of this issue is correct: the truth will set you free, or talk is cheap? Is the person as good as her word, or is she a spin doctor?

The church is not immune from this confusion. We claim that the high point of worship is the preaching of the word of God; at the same time, one of the worst things that can be said about a speaker is that he or she has “gone to preachin’.”

Every time I get up in this or any pulpit, my task is not to say what folks want to hear. And it also is not to tell people what to do as though they do not know what to do. The most powerful thing I can do is to put into words what folks would say if they could.

This morning, I want to examine with you this text from Matthew 25. In many ways, it can be a confusing text. Yet properly translated, it has much to say about the nature of our faithfulness in this world of God’s creation and our obedience.

Jesus tells a parable, a story about a wise and wealthy master. He conducts his business with the help of servants who assist him with all the things required in running a successful enterprise. Evidently the master is known for his shrewd business practices: as one of his workers states “he reaps where he does not sow, he gathers where he does not winnow the grain.” He is tough and drives a hard bargain.

His workers, slaves really, are like any group of employees: some are creative and industrious, and others are less so.

Now the master is required to go on a journey, and of course he wants his business to continue to flourish while he is away. So he puts the various workers in charge of his business and property to oversee in his absence. And he distributes the responsibilities according to each worker’s ability.

On his return, the master requests an accounting of what he has entrusted to them and what they had accomplished.

You and I are familiar with the rest of the story. The worker overseeing five talents made five more. The one overseeing two talents made two talents more. And the worker entrusted with one talent returned it to the master in absolutely pristine condition. The master called him faithless and threw him out.

Given this outcome, what is the proper translation of faithfulness according to this parable? I think most of us would say that being faithful is the same as being successful. Having five and making five more; having two and making two more. It clearly appears that the worker with one talent should have made one more. Merely returning what was given isn't good enough.

But I want to know about the fourth worker. You don't know about the fourth worker? He was given three talents, he invested them in the stock market, and when the bottom dropped out of the market he lost it all. He had nothing to return to his master. What did the master say to him? Hmm?

How oriented we are to success! Yet I am uncomfortable with that translation, and I suspect many of you are as well. And with good reason. You and I know that the reality of success and failure is far more complicated than the images of success and failure portrayed in magazines and television and the media.

There was a man named Al. He was a gifted artist who had a wife and two fine young sons. One night his oldest son developed a severe stomachache. They thought it was merely the flu and put him to bed. It turned out to be acute appendicitis. When they realized how serious it was, they rushed him to the hospital, but he died.

This terrible death wreaked emotional havoc in the family. Al's wife couldn't handle the loss and abandoned the husband and son. The father's health deteriorated under the burden of his sense of guilt and the strain of being a single parent. Al began to drink excessively.

Eventually, Al lost everything: his family, his home, his art, his work. After 15 years, he died in a San Francisco hotel room by himself.

Friends considered Al a complete failure. But one thing was inconsistent with that assessment. The younger son had grown up to be a remarkably loving and sensitive man.

One of Al's friends asked the boy, now a young man, how he had become such a special person given the terrible family situation in which he had grown up. The young man said, "You know, from my earliest recollections as a child until I left home at the age of 18, my father came into my room every night and gave me a kiss and said, 'I love you.'"

In the wreckage of all that makes up our lives, what is the true meaning of success and failure?

There was another young man, the son of an itinerant horse trainer. His father would go from stable to stable, from ranch to ranch, training horses. By the time the boy was a senior in high school, he had been in 20 different schools.

His senior year, a teacher assigned a paper about what the students wanted to do with their lives. This boy wrote, "Someday, I want to own a horse ranch." He wrote about this dream in great detail, and he even drew a diagram of a 200-acre ranch showing the location of all the buildings, the stables and the track. Then he drew a detailed floor plan of the house that would sit on the property. He put his whole heart into that project, and he turned it in on the day it was due.

Two days later he got the paper back. A big red "F" was on the paper along with a note that said, "Please see me after class." He went to see the teacher and asked why he received an "F."

"Well that's the most unrealistic dream for a boy like you. You have no money. You have no resources. You come from an itinerant family. Owning a horse ranch requires lots of money. You will never be able to do as you say you want to do." Then he added, "If you will rewrite this paper with a more realistic goal, I will reconsider your grade."

The boy went home. He asked his father what he should do. His father said, "I can't tell you what to do, but this is one of the most important decisions of your young life."

Struggling with it for several days, the boy finally brought the paper to his teacher. He put it on the teacher's desk and said, "This is the same paper I turned in before. You can keep the 'F' and I'll keep my dreams."

How do you define faithfulness? It doesn't always look like success, does it?

When a cross stands at the center of the Christian faith, success can never be the meaning of faithfulness.

I believe the appropriate translation of this parable is not about who succeeded and who failed. It is not about investment savvy or utilizing one's gifts and talents. It is about those who risk and those who play it safe.

There were workers who **risked losing everything**—and the one who fearfully risked nothing at all and returned it in mint condition. In many ways, this third worker was the one who took the greatest care of his master's property, yet the master condemned him as faithless.

Faithfulness means risking. Faithfulness means laying down our lives in love. Faithfulness means investing ourselves in things that may not provide an immediate return. Faithfulness means trusting in a God who raises the dead when all that we have been working for ends in a cross.

I am supposed to be preaching about stewardship this morning! And maybe I have been...

If stewardship is anything, it is about faithfulness in regard to what God has given us. What do we do with what we are given? What do we do with ourselves? Do we play it safe or do we risk it all?

A woman reflected about a time of confusion in her earlier adult years. She sensed God's calling but didn't know where or when or what God was calling her to do and to be.

Entering a chapel with pencil and paper, she wrote out all the things she intended to do for God. Her page filled up with words of great intention and devotion. She placed the sheet on the communion table. Nothing happened. There was no bolt of lightning, no dramatic voice of God. As a matter of fact, she felt nothing at all. She tried it again. Still she had no sense of peace.

Finally, a thought came to her, and it was almost like a voice of instruction. "Tear up all you have written. Take a clean sheet of paper with nothing on it other than your name signed at the bottom. Offer that, and let me fill in the details."

You see, stewardship is not merely giving to the church. In stewardship, you and I are dealing directly with God. And God pushes us further than we might anticipate

or expect. God isn't interested in protecting our comfort zone to make us feel good. God pushes us into risky faith so that we can become what God intends and bring healing to the world.

What does God want to make of this community called First Presbyterian Church? We can play it safe and go along to get along during this interim time, or we can enter into an extraordinary moment in the life of faith.

That can be dangerous to do. We relinquish control of the outcome. It doesn't come on our timing.

I would like to offer one last translation about faithfulness and finances. All of us are familiar with budgets and financial statements: line items listed with dollar amounts. When we see the church budget in black and white, it's not very inviting. For most of us, it is cold and dry and dull. What is easily forgotten is that every item translates into people and God's work through us.

When you see the line item "Christian Education," think of young children gathering in Sunday School to learn the Bible and our Christian faith; think of Confirmation kids who will claim for themselves the Christian faith on the day of their confirmation. When you see the line item "Congregational Life" and "Worship," remember hearts warmed and spirits lifted in song and worship; remember the fellowship of the family of faith and the loving hands of those who help in times of crisis. When you see the line item "Service and Mission," think of emergency housing and food through Urban Ministries, the children in our Day School program who are afforded an excellent beginning no matter their economic status, and a home for a family through Habitat.

Finances can be so cold, but they translate into flesh and blood. They incarnate the reality of God's presence with us, among us, and through us.

I am thinking again about that parable of Jesus. The workers were called to risk what they had been given. I wonder if the master was the one who took the biggest risk of all. It was his riches that were placed within the hands of folks who just might lose everything.

And the miracle of the master's trust in his workers is not that some who had five made five more or some who had two made two more. No, the miracle wasn't that the servants had more. The miracle was that they *were* more, more than they had ever been before. "You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much."

What a crazy gamble it is for God to entrust fallible human beings with such riches! But God has done exactly that. We have been given all that is necessary in Jesus Christ. What will we do with it?

Now is the time. It is our turn to put on the line what God has entrusted to us for the sake of his kingdom. And in that day when heaven calls us home, no one will need to translate for us the words of our master: “Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your master!”