Sermon Archive 611

Sunday 15 November, 2026
Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch
Reading: Matthew 25: 14-30
Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack

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Introduction: Providence tips into life

As I write this sermon, I'm sitting in my house. Through in the garage which has internal access, there's a smell of fresh rubber - two new tyres just fitted to my cute little car following the awarding of a new warrant of fitness. I'm good to go with driving about for another twelve months. Driving, as it happens, continues to be a privilege I enjoy, having been prohibited from doing it for fourteen months a few years ago. As I drive, I give thanks for my health, my alertness, and independence. My house now has no mortgage attached to it, so now I'm free to spend money of tyres, partial dentures from the dentist, and luxuries like being able to eat. It's been a sunny day at home, so the solar panels have hummed along nicely - saving the planet and my wallet in equal measure. I have good friends, a new recipe that tasted nice. I am wanting to affirm a source of providence who has been tipping blessings into this thing I call "my life".

Other people hearing my talk of "providence tipping blessings into life" might think I'm mis-characterising the situation. If there is blessing in life, it's not because of some hidden benefactor (whose sleeves drip blessings), but because of our own hard work and execution. You ***make*** your way! You ***take*** the opportunities that fall across your path. You ***build*** yourself.

Well, people who are good at seizing opportunity do seem to do well. So, there is something compelling to the story of the self-made person. Maybe also, though, there is something to considering how the opportunities seized have been granted in the first place. Who was the Granter of the opportunity that was taken?

That question - who is the One - might remain with us as we enter the world of a parable of Jesus. God gives gifts to three different people, who then work out what to do. It's framed in a story about the gift of money; but it's not really a money story. More about that later . . .

We listen for the Word of God.

Lesson: Matthew 25: 14-23

Music for Reflection:

Reflection: In the upper echelons, Monopoly is played

Gifts are just poured into the world - but they're not evenly distributed. In the parable, someone is given five talents, someone two, someone one. Just to clear up the modern ambiguity, in the parable "talent" isn't something we're good at. The talent, to the first audience, the people whom Jesus addressed, was a measure of money. As I said, the wider meaning of the parable isn't really about money, but the "talent" was a unit of money. Money makes things happen; it gives you power in the world. So, receiving two talents gives you pretty much twice the capacity to achieve things in the world than receiving one. Five gives you five times more. Money is the ***measure*** in this story, not the ***meaning***. The meaning is wider. It's kind of about power.

The truth is that some people are born with great power to move the world, to get about in the world. They're born to privilege - or at least to societies where the underprivileged receive support. They get education - some of them get private education, and good connections with others who also can afford it. Some fit well into the patterns of approval observed by their societies - I once described myself as a white, male, middle-class, educated heterosexual. And, indeed, most of those descriptors still fit. Power comes along with that.

Others are born into other rather less well-positioned circumstances. Some are given disabilities. Some are given awkward differences (sexual, racial, socio-economic). It's pretty hard in the white, male, middle-class, educated straight world for the disabled black poor uneducated lesbian. Like I say, the gifts fall differently into the world for some of God's people - whom the world just kind of expects just to get on with what they've been dealt.

Into this reality of life, where some receive many gifts, and others appear to have received less, Jesus tells a parable of this bloke who gifts different amounts to different people, then steps away to see what will happen. To begin with, let's consider only the first two.

The first of the two receives five talents. This places him in the top tier. (By the way, did you know that when writing sermons, I give attention to pronouns. I considered describing the person in the top rank not as "him", but as "her". I decided, in all good conscience though, that I couldn't do that, since in our country we have a gender-based wage equity gap. The person most likely in ***our*** culture to receive the most money is a "him" - maybe that's something we need to work on).

Anyway, this "him" takes the most advantageous gift he's been given, puts it to work, and does well with it - in direct proportion to what he's been given. It's like a 100% development of what he's received. One turns advantage into

advantage, doesn't one? You get education, you turn that to advantage. You get treated seriously because you're male, white and straight, and you turn that to advantage. You use what you have been given - to grow more stuff in your life. And at the top of the advantage tree, five talents earns five more.

Further down the tree, two talents, in exactly the same prudent way, are generating two more. Advantage given is turned to investment made - and the return is even - another 100% return.

Have you noticed a wider picture! This of course means that the five talent people become ten talent people, and the two talent people become four talent people. There's a gap opening up - into which maybe the justice-fired prophets need to speak. That's a sermon for another day.

-ooOoo-

Before the next serious section of this sermon, here's a wee distraction about a childhood experience with a board game.

The game was Monopoly. My older brother, my younger sister and I used to play it. My sister was too young really to understand what was going on. My brother had a concept of strategy. I fell somewhere in between not having a clue and having a strategy. At the end of every game, my sister had wandered off; I stayed on the acknowledge that I had lost all my money, and my brother owned all the hotels in Mayfair. In terms of our later participation in the labour market, I think you could say those early patterns have persisted - except that my sister moved to another game through marriage.

Interestingly, the inventor of the game Monopoly only released it as a dark-side counterpart to another game (called "Prosperity") that showed what the market could do if people co-operated within it. But early on, the co-operation game was dumped by the investors. It was decided that the cut and thrust of competition was much more fun than working together for shared community wealth. It seems that, within 20th and 21st Century Western culture, we prefer games that create wealth and poverty, success and failure, winner and loser. There we go.

Here's the next part of the reading.

Lesson: Matthew 25: 24-30

Reflection: In the other echelons, let's not be afraid

Entering the story is someone who is given less than the other characters. Is this more disability? Less access to education? A greater distance from the social norms that give advantage? Not sure. One talent is still a generous amount of money. It's just in the scheme of the extreme advantage of others, it

seems to be in the category of "less". When others get more, we can be blinded to our plenty. Whatever! That's not the important thing in this last part of the story. The important part of the story is that this last character suffers something the previous characters don't. This character is ***frightened*** of the One who gives the gifts. When invited to address the Gift Giver, he says "I know that you are harsh, reaping where you do not sow, gathering where you do not scatter. So I was ***afraid***, and did nothing with what you had given me" - for fear of losing.

At the start of this sermon, I said "who is the One who gives us opportunity to live?" To grow? To offer back to God the gifts that we have been given?

So, who is that One?

Is it some fear-monger who paralyzes our offering of self, and imagination, and hope and faith and love? Or is it someone more recognisable to us as the Giver of good gifts? That's the big question for communities of faith, who wonder about how to develop what we have, who we are, what we might become.

I said at the start that while the parable characterises the gifting of God in terms of units of money, it's not about money. It's about finding an understanding of God that liberates us not to fear, and to close down in fear, but to use what even in relative terms might seem meagre in relation to the super-privleged, to bravely get on with life - using what we have been given to grow - adding ***our*** part to the gvien bounty.

-ooOoo-

At sermon's end, here I am, still sitting in my house. Two new tyres on my car. Alive, alert, independent. Solar panels humming, dentures coming. Someone is tipping blessings into my life. So, let's not be afraid. Let's not bury the blessing. Let's take what we have, and do the work of God.

A moment of quiet.