

## “Taking Responsibility”

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Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church

Dedication Sunday – October 28, 2012

Matthew 25: 14-30

In the well-known parable of the talents, the focus is often on the third servant, the one who buries his talent. Many commentaries argue that the third servant is meant to represent the Pharisees who worshiped the law and buried the coin given by the master, almighty God in the common analysis, precisely so they could give it back exactly as they had found it. That way the status quo could continue. They didn't like change. Because they were not willing to be creative and to grow, they were condemned. Yet I am somewhat sympathetic to the third servant. He starts off with only 1 talent while the others get to have more, and we don't have the benefit of the backstory of why he had come to view his master, God, as a harsh man and a thief. Apparently, Matthew doesn't think we need to know or that it doesn't matter. What matters is that the servant isn't correct and isn't rewarded because he doesn't take responsibility.

William Barclay argues that the parable of the talents helps Christians realize several things. First, that God gives us all different gifts. One man had 5 talents, one man 2 talents and another 1. We are not asked to do things for which we lack talents. Secondly, that what gifts we have we are to use in responsible ways. The first two men use their talents, their gifts. The other does nothing productive. And thirdly, that is you have a gift and you use it, you will eventually be given more. That is the ultimate meaning of the master's words, “You have been faithful in a few things, I will put you in charge over many things.” Twice, in two different cases, the master says those words to the servants who do something productive with what they have.

This is one of the great lessons of life. If we are faithful in small things, we can have an impact over bigger things. We learn as children, that if we practice responsibly each day, we will become good at things over time. If you have a gift or a talent, and you exercise it, you will be able to do something with it. In his 2008 book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote about the 10000 hour rule. Gladwell argues that the secret to great success in life that it takes 10000 hours of practice for a person to really master a difficult subject or practice. But if we have a gift, whether it's for golf or singing or drawing, and don't use it we eventually lose it. If you are faithful with practicing as a child, you will be better able to succeed as an adult. My son Andrew is going to Halloween as a tennis player on Wednesday.

If he practices now, he may be able to play when he grows up. On the other hand, I have seen pictures of me as a six year old in a pirate costume and I am still going as a pirate on Wednesday. And I don't think I have gotten any better at being a pirate. Some of us haven't progressed.

And then in the parable of the talents, we hear about responsibility. That if one is responsible in small things that is a sign one can be responsible for larger things. That responsibility is earned, developed, nurtured and gained. It is not something we are born with.

So we have to teach responsibility to our children. It's why we are teaching responsibility to our children in their bringing forward their offerings.

One of my girls' favorite nursery rhymes, mostly because of the corresponding pictures of the cats, is Eliza Lee Follen's *The Three Little Kittens*<sup>1</sup>.

"Three little kittens lost their mittens; And they began to cry.  
Lost your mittens! You naughty kittens Then you shall have no pie."

There is a link between being responsible with gloves and getting dessert. Being responsible with what we have often gets us more. Whether it's our mittens or our gifts for sport, school, music or anything else.

We need to set a good example for our children in being responsible and teaching responsibility. Sometimes we are not successful as parents. According to the Hebrew Bible, a lack of responsibility is a key problem for humanity. We might remember in prominent passages in Genesis, that when Adam and Eve were caught having eaten the apple in the garden they showed no accountability. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the snake. Their kids inherited their tendency. After Cain killed Abel, he tried to avoid responsibility for his actions by saying, "Am I my brother's keeper?" Every election season, when I see politicians, particularly incumbents, blaming everyone else for their nations' troubles, I am reminded that we haven't come that far. And yet, we want to be and to follow leaders who take responsibility. That mentality doesn't yield as much trust as does someone for whom "the buck stops here."

When we take responsibility for our desks and rooms as children, people see we can take responsibility for a home. When we become responsible for our project at work we show we can handle responsibility for a team. In his commencement address to Yale graduates last May, Richard Levin that when you receive a diploma, you are not entitled to rights and privileges, but are "admitted to all the

rights and responsibilities” of the degree. Levin said that includes considering the well-being of others as well as yourselves. That is to take responsibly. When we show we are responsible in school we show we are ready to take responsibility for larger things in the broader world.

Someone once said to Daniel Webster, "You have a colossal mind. What is the greatest thought that you have ever had?" He said, "I've thought about many things, but the most awesome, the most terrifying, the most shattering thought I've ever had, is my personal accountability to God one day."

The idea of responsibility implies that we respond to something or someone. William Bennett writes that to respond is to answer.<sup>ii</sup> The phone rings, we respond by answering it. To be responsible therefore means to be answerable. It means to be accountable. Each of us has been given some gifts, of time, talents and our financial resources. Ultimately, each of us is answerable, accountable for what we do with them. Just like the servants in the parable.

This week the broader church celebrates Reformation Sunday. We will lean into it a bit more next week but it commemorates a time when faithful people began to take responsibility for their church because they believed they were ultimately accountable to God.

On October 31, 1517 was when Martin Luther decided he had had enough of abuses in the faith and tacked his 95 theses onto a church door in Germany. The Protestant Reformation was in part about the people of God taking responsibility for their own faith. They demanded changes, accountability, and access to scripture. They were saying “we can read the Bible, we can connect directly with God, and we will take responsibility for changes within the church. We care enough about the direction of our community that we are going to put our money where our mouth is, risk our careers and even our lives for the sake of a stronger body of Christ.” They felt accountable ultimate to God. And responsible for their church.

As adults, we learn that if we are faithful in a few or small things, we can grow to have an impact over many things too. The only way ultimately to have a really large impact, is to invest your time, energy and resources in others. If we invest what we have in others, the impact will outlast us. But if we try to hoard, hide and bury what we have, as the third servant did, eventually we will lose it. We can't

take our time, talents or treasure with us. The only way they multiply is if we invest outside ourselves. That is what it means to act responsibly with our gifts.

We are called to take responsibility for our church. We do it by being part of a lay ministry or volunteering. We do it through service and leadership. We do it by making a financial commitment to strengthen the church.

The church cannot thrive without our gifts. But with our gifts we can change lives. I believe that so strongly that our family is increasing our gifts and pledge this year and I hope you will join us. Being able to give is an amazing thing. You were created to use your gifts in ways that build the kingdom of God, so that the bushel of God's love can overflow the church.

We dedicate our lives, including our financial resources, to God's kingdom because doing so shows we are responsible for the gifts of the God we are accountable to. It starts today. It begins with our dedicating ourselves to God to whom we are accountable, with our making our prayerful commitments to serve in the world.

There is a legend from the ninth century when Alfred the Great was king in England. In Alfred's time, England was invaded by the Danes. There were so many of the Danish invaders and they were so strong and fierce, that for a long time they won almost every battle. After many defeats, King Alfred's army was broken and scattered. In order to save themselves, all of the soldiers, including the king, disguised themselves and went into hiding. After several days of wandering, the king came to a woodcutter's hut. The woodcutter's wife invited the king in, but since he was in disguise she did not recognize him. The woman then said that she would provide him with dinner if he would watch the apples that were baking on the fire so that they would not burn while she went out to milk the cow. Yet as the king sat there next to the fire, his thoughts began to turn to his troubles. How was he going to reassemble his army? How was he going to drive out the Danes? The more he thought about it, though, the more hopeless the future seemed. A little while later, the woodcutter's wife returned and found her apples burned to a crisp. She scolded the king for not doing his job of watching the apples and angrily informed him that no one was going to be able to have dinner now. Just then the woodcutter came home. At once, he recognized the guest to be none other than the king. When the woman learned who the stranger was, she was horrified because of the ways he had spoken to her and begged the king to forgive her. But King Alfred told her to rise. He said, "You were right to scold me. I told you I would watch the apples, and then I let them burn. I deserved what you said. Anyone who accepts a gift, whether it be large or small, should perform it faithfully. I have failed this

time, but it will not happen again. My duties as king await me." Alfred was reminded up of responsibilities, got up with renewed spirit, gathered his soldiers and soon drove the Danes out of England.

If you are faithful with a few things, you will be given greater things.

Whatever our talents are. However we are able to further the mission of Jesus Christ. Wherever we see an opportunity to help, let us take responsibility for our church, for our future and for the gifts God has given us in love. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> William Bennett. *The Book of Virtues*.

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