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If this parable were set in 2011, how might the absentee landowner have responded to the third and final slave, the one who dug a hole in the ground and hid his one talent there for safe keeping? With a little affirmation, perhaps? I mean, today some investment gurus aren't totally discouraging risk-averse people from stowing their life savings under their mattresses. In this economic climate, what could the other two slaves have possibly done to actually *double* their master's money? If they were to deposit it in a savings account, a bank wouldn't give them much more than 1%. A CD might yield 5%. Stocks, bonds, real estate? I don't know... They're all kind of iffy these days, aren't they?

So what *were* these guys doing? What exactly does “trading” that money mean? Were they playing the slot machines at a local casino? Investing in gold? ...Or were they simply loaning their master's talents to other peasants and collecting some hefty interest payments along the way? ...Most likely the latter, because the only way to do anything more than simply maintain wealth in 30 CE was to ignore the Jewish law against collecting interest and loan money out at exorbitant rates. In those days the wealthy were charging anywhere from 40-200% interest on loans to peasants. Which eventually pushed the peasants into bankruptcy, forcing them to forfeit their land to those wealthy creditors. ...Not so unlike today's credit card companies and mortgage bankers. And so burying money was actually considered a shrewd money management technique in those days. There were even some rabbinical FDIC type structures in place to protect trustees who lost their masters' buried treasure!

So then why *was* the landowner so upset with the only slave who had probably dealt honorably with his money? Shouldn't he have been patting him on the back? How is it that the law breakers got rewarded? And, for that matter, why was only *one* talent entrusted to this guy? That doesn't seem fair, does it? No wonder he hid the money. It must have felt like his boss had no confidence in him. Why make it a self fulfilling prophecy and lose that money in some kind of a risky venture?

But, before we start to feel too sorry for this one-talent guy, I need to point something out: First, a talent--or in Greek, *talanta* or a *talanton*—was the largest denomination of currency in the first-world economic system. It was a coin impossible to put in your pocket and nearly as difficult to move because it weighed 50 to 75 pounds! And it was worth about 6,000 *denarii* or, in contemporary terms, somewhere between 1 and 6 million dollars. For all of these slaves, it would have been like winning the lottery. They would hardly have known what to do with all that money.

That said, you may have noticed in the reading that the man doled out his coins to each slave according to his ability. The Greek word used here for ability could also be interpreted as “power” or “status.” So these are three men who over time have proven their varying money management and their people skills to their master. Given that a talent was so precious, why *would* he have entrusted a larger sum of money to a less gifted and savvy servant? That would have been foolish. And, yet, quite a bit of money *had* been entrusted to this man. One to 6 million dollars is nothing to sneeze at. And what exactly *is* the qualitative difference between 6 and 30 million dollars? Perhaps there's no need to pity this guy after all.

But, what about this? As gifted as the first two slaves were, what if some of the peasants had happened to default on their loans and been unable to pay the astronomical interest or even repay the principal, whether with cash or with land? What if they had left the lenders empty handed? I mean, we all know that, to earn such a high rate of return, you'd have to take some pretty major risks. So if the master had returned, gotten back his one talent from the third slave and received absolutely nothing from the other two, what would his response have been then? Would *they* have been cast into darkness and been left to weep and gnash their teeth?

Of course, we can't say for sure, and this is all hypothetical fiction anyway. But I'm going to guess that they still would have fared better with their master than the one-talent slave. You see, these two men both seem to have intuited a message that apparently went over the third one's head: That this money was intended to be used in the boss's absence, not taken out of circulation and squirreled away. And, yes, there are inherent risks associated with that activity. But, as the life and career of Apple founder Steve Jobs has been teaching us of late, there is much of value to learn from bold risk taking and mistake making. And it can ultimately lead to far, far greater innovation and success.

But there's another reason I think the master still would have favored the first two slaves, regardless of whether they had lost all of his money. And that is because their actions have wordlessly expressed the high degree of trust and confidence they had in their relationships with the landowner. Unlike the third man, in this text they have not accused him of harshness or of stealing others' crops. They did not fear him and, in fact, seem to have delighted in investing his money and returning the proceeds of those transactions to him. This was no dreaded chore for them. It was fun to exercise his talents and theirs on his behalf! And, at the most basic of levels,

they were making an effort. How much energy or talent did the third slave really need to expend to bury the money and leave it underground until his master returned home? A little upfront and then none, unless maybe he went to check on it every so often. Perhaps he was lazy, as his master labeled him. Or maybe he was shut down, immobilized by his fear, and simply buried both his head and the treasure in the sand.

But the thing is, he was the only man of the three to accuse the boss of either harshness or dishonesty. And, at least until the very end of the parable, there is no evidence that the master was either one of those things. So we have to seriously wonder about this man's perceptions. Is he, in fact, seeing matters clearly? ... Well, the master did take away the one talent from him and sentence him to weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness. Sounds like a pretty harsh, angry, scary character to me. But again, we must ask ourselves, just how reliable are this man's perceptions? Might this just be the lens through which he sees and interprets the people and situations in his life? And might his fearful attitude set him up for failure? Or at least what he perceives as punishment and failure? To what degree is he culpable for the less than positive outcome he experiences?

Now I want to be clear that I am not preaching some kind of a prosperity gospel or New Agey power of positive thinking message here. There are far too many people in this world who are genuinely oppressed and live in poverty through no fault of their own and in fact *because of* unjust socioeconomic structures and the concentration of wealth with a very few folks not unlike this landowner. And, indeed, that is another interpretation of this text. But we're not going to go with that one for today's message.

No, we're going to focus on the abundance in this parable. And we're going to ask ourselves, how likely it is that *anyone* in 1st Century Palestine possessed the equivalent of 73 million dollars. And if they did, what are the chances they would leave town for a l-o-n-g time and delegate safekeeping of that huge sum of money not to a family member or a business associate, but to a handful of slaves? Would you? The point here is that Jesus greatly exaggerated the circumstances in this parable for effect. And so, if we assume that this is another metaphor for the kingdom of God, and that God is the landowner, then we are looking at a God of overwhelming, incalculable, beyond-our-wildest-dreams abundance. And we are looking at a God who calls and trusts each one of us to be active stewards of that abundance. Not just stewards of money, but of all the gifts and assets we bring to the table: Our musicianship, our hospitality, our gifts for nurturing and prayer, our leadership, teaching, technical, and communication skills; our gifts for advocacy and truth-telling; our ability to plan events, to organize and empower people; our talents for writing thoughtful notes to people just when they most need a kind word; our historic building, our enviable downtown location, and, of course, our money. ...As you may recall from our asset mapping session with Cheryl Burke earlier this year, these are only a few of the many, many blessings God has bestowed upon this church.

So where do we find ourselves in this parable? Are we the delighted, risk-taking, talent-embracing servants? Or are we the fearful, cautious one who can't wait to bury his talent? Are we bold, creative entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs was? Or do we stick with the status quo because, well, we've always done it this way? Do we focus on the abundance of gifts and resources we possess? Or do we instead set our sights low? Because of our size, because of our median age and income, because of our empty nursery? Do we fail to recognize the wisdom, the experience, the nimbleness and multi-tasking prowess with which these very same factors have equipped us?

Do we love and trust God enough to give our all to serve the kingdom of God on earth? While this may not be a *5 talanta* church, even a *1 talanta* church is entrusted with much by God. And commissioned to invest that *1 talanta* to grow God's realm.

I hope that you will keep this parable in mind when you fill out your pledge cards and update your time and talent surveys for 2012. In God's economy, there are no limits to what we can do and be together. We can dream big. In this past year we have done so much to minister to our church family and friends, as well as the world, from Cadillac to South Dakota to Pakistan. We have made improvements to our physical plant, from the steeple to the ladies' room to the soon to be christened upstairs meeting room. 2011 has been a very good year for First Congregational Cadillac, United Church of Christ. What will we imagine for 2012? To what is God calling us talented servants?

May we be just bold and brave enough to perceive where God is moving in this community and get out in front of it.

Amen.