

Act in Faith! – Get Down to Business!

Matthew 25:14-30

Preached at Edgewood UMC, Fargo ND

November 13, 2011

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We have heard this Scripture so many times.

It's usually used as a lead-in for a stewardship sermon
and it's used to tell us to give our money and our skills to God.

Well . . .

As Clarence Jordan –

The wonderful Greek scholar, professor, and farmer
who was a co-founder of the Koinonia Community in Georgia
and inspired Habitat for Humanity –

says:

We've got it all backwards!

He says:

“The Lord gives His talents to us.

A talent is not some skill.”

It's not money, either.

“This isn't what Jesus is saying.”

To help us understand what is going on, Clarence Jordan sets the scene:

“Jesus tells this story to His followers while they are on their way to Jerusalem,
near the end of His ministry.

It was the last week, and Jesus had been talking about the revolution and so forth,
and His disciples were all excited.

And they were wondering whether they were going to have a press conference,
to take over the airport and the telephone exchange,
and there was excitement in the air.

Perhaps the revolution was about to burst out immediately with overwhelming force.

And to answer that kind of thinking, Jesus told the parable of the talents.

Then Clarence Jordan explains:

What are these talents?

Are they money? No, Jesus had no money to give.

What did He have?

What is the stock-in-trade of a great teacher?

It's his ideas, his concepts, his teachings.

He leaves them to His followers.

All these three years He has been “talenting” them,

Giving them his teachings.

Now he's saying,

“You want me to come in here and pull some angels out of the sky
and set up a revolution?
Oh, no. I’ve been giving you over all these months together
the currency of the kingdom,
and if it comes, it’s gonna come
by your doin’ business with what I’ve turned over to you.”

In other words, as Clarence Jordan says,

“We have to do more than mouth the ideas of the God Movement.
[aka the kingdom/reign of God]
We have to trade with these ideas.”

Clarence Jordan give us an example:

“To us [Jesus] says, ‘I’ve turned over to you the idea of brotherhood.’
And some of us can say,
‘Yes, Lord, I got out and dealt with that idea and multiplied it.’
But others of us turn in an accounting like this:
‘Yes, Lord, I remember you talkin’ about brotherhood but,
You know, I was scared.
I started to preach a sermon on that on race relations Sunday,
but Deacon Jones said, “Hmmm.”
You know, I didn’t want to upset the deacon.
No point in breakin’ up your church.
Besides, Deacon Jones, he’s one of our major tithers,
and he’s got something to tithe.
So, Lord, I was scared.
I was scared of this whole proposition
and I buried this idea of brotherhood.”

Here’s another example:

“[Jesus says,] ‘I gave you the idea of peace.’
[And some of us say,]
‘Yes, Lord. But You don’t understand the civilization we live in.
You gotta talk force.
Force is the only language most folks understand today.
Really, it’s the only language people know how to talk.
So, Lord, I had a chance to witness for peace,
but I was kind of scared somebody might identify me
with these flower children, and I just buried the whole thought.”

Clarence Jordan reminds us;

We’ve all been given Jesus talents – his teachings –
And we’re given them in different proportions.
These are world-changing, explosive, teachings
But, as he says, we are frightened:
“We say, ‘I might lose out tradin’ on these [teachings].”

I might lose my neck or my job or my house.’
And we’re right.

This is risk capital Jesus has given to us.
But that doesn’t excuse us from activity.”

The man in the parable didn’t steal anything from his boss.
In fact, he restored everything.
He just didn’t do what he was told.

Discussing talents – Jesus teachings -- isn’t the same as living these talents/teachings.

This is how Clarence Jordan describes this man:

“This [man] had read a book on talent preservation;
he had read a book on economics;
he was quite knowledgeable on the present value of a talent;
he held conferences on inflation and deflation of the talent.
He just never got to work.
He never put it out there and traded with it.”
In other words, he never got down to business
and lived out those teachings!

Now there’s no way to make a difference unless we live out these teachings –
unless we get down to business with these talents Jesus has given us
in our everyday life, here and now.

But what does that look like?

We need examples of this kind of living,
because knowing that ordinary people can do this
encourages us to live differently,
especially when it’s difficult.

Well, today is UMW Sunday,
And a wonderful thing about United Methodist Women is that their history
is full of the stories of women who lived out Jesus’ teachings.

United Methodist Women are a powerhouse in the world.

UMW has nearly one million members in the United States,
and global partnerships with millions of women in countries across the world.
Its purpose is to foster spiritual growth, develop leaders and advocate for justice.
Here, in the United States, United Methodist Women
raise nearly \$25 million each year for programs and projects
related to women and children –
after all, if the world is good for women and children,
it’s good for everyone.

For over 135 years, UMW has focused on children, youth, and family advocacy,
racial justice, public policy, and global policy.

UMW is one of a handful of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations] that have a permanent seat in the United Nations.

In 1960, they established the United Methodist Office for the United Nations and they also built the Church Center for the United Nations.

Currently, UMW is part of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security that was formed in May 2000

All of this work grew out of work women were doing with John Wesley through the Methodist movement in England in the 1740s –

They lived out the teachings of Jesus by:
visiting the sick,
developing supported employment for the poor,
creating the first free medication dispensary,
setting up homes for widows,
creating a loan fund for short-term needs.

Here, in the United States, women's national and international missionary work in both the Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren traditions that eventually joined to become The United Methodist Church began in earnest in the early 19th century.

On November 11, 1839 –

172 years ago this past week –

60 women formed the first Evangelical Association's women's society

By 1869 these women were supporting women missionaries in India.

Nine years later, there were women missionaries

in China, Mexico, South America and Bulgaria Japan, Sierra Leone and Italy.

while women in the US were raising funds, managing administrative details,
training and deploying missionaries to work with women and children,
and starting schools.

This connection with women in other countries stirred American women's imaginations.

In 1878, Ella Yost-Preyer – a young woman who could not go to Japan for health reasons – advocated for the formation of a women's missionary society.

While women responded with enthusiasm,

it was reported that the men

“did not look with favor upon a women's organization.”

So, the Board of Missions decided not to honor her request.

Ella was surprised.

She said, “I was so sure it was the thing to do it was inconceivable (to me) that anyone should hold back and we had to go oh, so slowly.”

Mrs. S.J. Gamertsfeldes added:

“This reply to the request of the women was not very comforting,
but it did not result in an abatement of effort,
neither did it daunt their courage;

they were sure they were right and entirely within the province of women's work,
and so instead of meekly surrendering

they merely sharpened their tools and their wits
and continued their efforts in the same loving spirit
which had characterized their work hitherto.”

Moving forward in faith quickly made a difference.

Two years later, in 1880, 20 year-old Minerva Strawman Spreng of Lindsey Ohio
petitioned the Board of Missions

to organize an Evangelical Association’s Women’s Missionary Society
in her own home church .

This time the General Board of Missions not only responded favorably,
they recommended that mission societies –

whether they consisted of men and women together,
or whether they were separate men’s and women’s groups –
be established in local churches.

Soon missionaries were sent to Malaysia, Korea, and the Philippines.

Schools were started in in Brazil, West Africa, and Central Zaire.

Before 1900, women missionaries were at work around the world
starting schools and orphanages for girls and boys

in Georgia, Los Angeles, Albuquerque, Appalachia, and Puerto Rico.

They were also establishing medical clinics;
teaching English as a second language;
working with women on health issues;
and teaching the Bible.

In the United States, the women in these missionary societies
engaged in prayer together and incorporated the teachings of the Gospel
into public life in America, as they began to address the social ills of their time.

They worked for human rights and social justice.

by addressing issues of:

poverty, child labor, immigration, migrant labor, family life,
and full clergy rights for women.

They provided hands-on assistance:

for slaves who had been freed in the South

for Chinese women immigrants who came to San Francisco

for Native Americans who were treated unjustly

They started community centers, medical missions, and homes for children.

By 1920 women were studying the intersection of Jesus’ teachings & the “race question”
and, as a result, they developed ways

for black and white women to work together.

They used their understanding of the Gospel

to influence national legislation and policy by:

- Continuously advocating for the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act.
- Supporting legislation to help “all groups exercise citizenship rights” until the Voters Rights Act was passed by Congress in 1965.
- Supporting the extension of Social Security coverage to domestic and agricultural workers.
- Supporting anti-lynching legislation
- Advocating and working for justice and equality

- in the administration and allocation of government services without discrimination based on “race, creed, or class.”
- Speaking out on the negative use of race and gender by candidates, the media and the public during the 2008 election process and now during the 2011 run up to the 2012 election process.

All in all, the women of UMW created and now support 103 institutions across the United States – including community centers, schools, colleges, health care facilities and women's residences.

Today, in the 21st century, many of the problems faced by the women who began the early Methodist and EUB mission societies have re-emerged with a new urgency.

So now United Methodist women are living out their Gospel faith to address: the economy, homelessness, racial divisions, threats to the environment, lack of affordable health care, funding for veterans' benefits, concerns for the well-being of children and the elderly, public education, substance abuse and addiction, new waves of immigration, human trafficking, gender-based violence, humanitarian aid for women and children, and world peace.

It seems like an overwhelming list of problems.

But the genius of UMW is that it is based on prayer and reflection on the teachings of Jesus and it is based on the faith that small acts of love build on each other so that empowering one person empowers everyone.

Here's where the faith of the women of UMW is leading them:

In the United States and in other countries they are implementing United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security that was passed on October 30, 2010. The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts . . .

It also requires UN countries to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, especially in situations of armed conflict.

The UMW's Bible Women program brings leadership training and development to marginalized women in remote and urban areas.

They study: the Bible, literacy, health and nutrition, economic development, human rights and women's rights.

Thanks to their partnership with Laubach Literacy International these courses are offered in many languages

UMW members also have the opportunity to participate in the Ubuntu Explorers Program and visit women in 400 partner programs in 110 countries.

Ubuntu is an African word (and proverb) meaning
“I am human because you are human.”
It is about sharing ourselves and our gifts with each other.
For UMW it is a way to experience and live into the diversity
and beauty of the Body of Christ.
Any UMW member can do this!
In 2011, women went to India, Russia, and Sierra Leone
In 2012, trips are being planned to visit women in the Philippines,
Northern Ireland, Sierra Leone, and Haiti

All of the work of the UMW is supported by an emphasis on spiritual growth.
UMW has some of the best Bible studies for its local groups and circles,
and its reading program includes books being read in seminaries and in Congress.
In addition, UMW has on-line spiritual growth resources to use and share with others,
as well as leadership resources
to support women as leaders in their workplaces and wider communities.
And the UMW Schools of Mission connect 25,000 women every year.
For United Methodist Women,
Deep faith, lively spirituality, relationships, and practical leadership training
support the ways they live into Jesus’ teachings.

They know exactly what Clarence Jordan means when he says:
It’s time to “get off our back ends
and start doin’ somethin’ with these [teachings of Jesus]. . . .
This parable is one of Jesus’ ways of saying,
‘You better get up and git!
I’ve given you these [teachings],
turned them over to you.
[These are] My treasure.
Now, what are you gonna do with them?
You gonna wrap them up in some theological junk
or are you gonna get out in the streets
and [get down to business with them]?’”

Mrs. E.M. Spreng was one of the 60 women
who organized the first American Women’s Missionary Society 172 years ago.
Her words are an encouragement to us today:
“[Do] not to be afraid to attempt big things for God. . . .
Be faithful and keep at it!”
Amen.

Sources:

The New Encyclopedia of Social Reform: Including All Social Reform Movements and Activities, and the Economic, Industrial, and Sociological Facts and Statistics of All Countries and All Social Objects, by William Dwight Porter Bliss, Rudolph Michael Binder, Funk & Wagnalls, 1908, p. 763

“Tell them not to be afraid to attempt big things for God. Tell them to be faithful and keep at it!” Mrs. E.M. Spreng’s parting message before her death on April 5, 1924. She was one of the 50 founders of the Women’s Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association in November 1839, and led that organization for 50 years

Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation by Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos, pp. 119-123

United Methodist Women: <http://new.gbgm-umc.org/umw>

United Nations: OSAGI (Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women): <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps>

Texts:

Matthew 25:14-30

‘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.”

A version of Matthew 25:14-30 from *Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation*:

"It’s like a businessman who was leaving town for a long time and called in his assistants and turned over his investments to them. He made one responsible for about five hundred thousand dollars, another

two hundred thousand, and another a hundred thousand—according to each one’s ability—and then he left town. Right away the man with the five hundred grand got to work and made five hundred more. The man with the two hundred grand did the same and made another two hundred. But the guy with the hundred C’s went and rented a safe-deposit box and put his boss’ money in it. After a long time the boss returned and called his assistants together for an accounting. The one with the five hundred thousand brought his other five hundred thousand and said, ‘Sir, you let me have five hundred grand; look, I’ve made another five hundred,’ The boss said, ‘Splendid, you good and responsible worker! You were diligent with the smaller sum; I’ll entrust you with a larger one. You’ll be a partner in my business.’ Then the one with the two hundred G’s came and said, ‘Sir, you let me have two hundred thousand; look, I’ve made another two hundred.’ The boss said, ‘Splendid, you good and responsible worker! You were diligent with the smaller sum, I’ll entrust you with a larger one. You’ll be a partner in my business.’ Well, the hundred grand man came up and said, ‘Sir, I know you are a hard-nosed man, squeezing pennies you haven’t yet made and expecting a profit before the ink has dried. I was plain scared to take any chances, so I rented a safe-deposit box and put your money in it. Look, you’ve got every cent.’ But his boss replied, ‘You sorry, ornery bum! You knew that I squeeze pennies I haven’t yet made, and expect profits before the ink dries. Then you should have turned my money over to the bank so that upon my return I would get back at least my principal with interest. So then, y’all take the money away from him and give it to the one with the million. For it will be given to everyone who has the stuff, and he’ll have plenty, but the man who doesn’t have the stuff will have even what he has taken away from him. Now as for this useless critter, throw him in the back alley. That’ll give him something to moan and groan about.’ (Matthew 25:14-30)