**Judges 4:1-7**

**I Thessalonians 5:1-11**

**Matthew 25:14-30**

One of the benefits of having a faith tradition that’s been around for not just decades (like Scientology) or centuries (like Mormonism), but millennia (like us and many others), is that it grows. It might be more correct to say that we are the ones who grow. And as we gain more knowledge – in science or technology, history or philosophy – we grow and change and our faith grows with us.

Christianity is presently undergoing a tremendous growth spurt. It started about the turn of the prior century, when more scientific developments were unleashed than the world knew what to do with. Our task has been – and remains – to re-imagine and re-verify the Christian message so that it continues to be life-giving in light of new knowledge. One of the people at the vanguard of this task is the late scientist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard (TAY-jar) de Chardin (day-CHAR-day). His writings were initially rejected by the Roman Catholic Church but today have been embraced by two of the last three popes. And to our credit, the US Episcopal Church celebrates Teilhard with a feast day. On April 10th![[1]](#footnote-1)

But 55 years ago – soon after his death – his writings were officially condemned by his mother church. Here's some of the wording of that condemnation:

These works abound in such ambiguities and serious errors as to offend Catholic doctrine... For this reason, the most eminent and most revered Fathers of the Holy Office [the Vatican] exhort all bishops, superiors of religious institutes, rectors of seminaries and presidents of universities, to protect the minds, particularly of the youth, against the dangers presented by the works of Fr. Teilhard de Chardin.

That must have hurt! This man was way ahead of his time and Christianity is catching up and growing. As a scientist, Teilhard worked in the field researcher as a paleontologist and geologist in Egypt and China. As a man in religious orders, he sought to understand spirituality in light of science. He especially wanted to locate Christianity in the broad sweep of evolution. Here’s an amazing quote: "Christianity fulfills an essential function in evolution. The goal of Christianity is the aim of evolution itself – personal unity in love."[[2]](#footnote-2)

The goal of Christianity is personal unity in love. A radical idea. “Personal unity in love” probably wasn’t what your grandma heard in church. The goal of evolution is personal unity in love. That’s also radical and still way ahead of the scientific community. Teilhard saw both Christianity and the natural, created order aligning in the task of love. Frankly, anything having to do with love is radical!

As theologian and scientist, Teilhard gives us new tools – a new lens – with which to consider our faith. That’s part of our current growth spurt. So consider today's parable of the talents in light of these new tools. The parable isn’t about money but about *generativity*, a concept from evolution. *Generativity* is the capacity or ability to generate, grow, or reproduce. Through this lens the parable askes the question: what do we generate with our lives? What do we make out of what we've been given? And why?

Teilhard partly answers those questions in his book *The Divine Milieu*:

God obviously has no need of the products of your busy activity since God has everything without your help. The only thing that concerns God; the only thing God desires intensely, is *the faithful use of your freedom and the preference you accord God over all the things around you*.

The faithful use of your freedom……….the preference you accord God over everything else. Christianity may be growing with new insights but there’s some old time religion in that! Faithful use of your freedom can be expressed as, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and everything else shall be given unto you." Faithful use of your freedom: your moral, physical, emotional autonomy. It’s freely given. What you do with it is your business. What about the preference you accord God? The Bible teaches in both testaments: "Love the Lord with all your heart, mind, soul and strength." Someone might say, “How do you prefer God?” And you can say, “I prefer God first!”

When Jesus told the parable of the talents the word “talent” did not have the meaning it has today. Today it means our abilities or giftedness, as in being talented. Originally it meant a huge sum of money. One talent was worth what an ordinary worker made in 15 years. So the master in this story is giving each of his servants a fortune.

But the parable isn’t about money. It’s about *generativity:* what we generate with the *faithful use of our freedom* while keeping a preference for God.

The parable opens with an act of generosity. The story of our lives – each of us – opens with the same thing: the generosity of life itself. Your story – my story – from beginning to end is about generosity and the freedom to do with it what we will.

The master entrusts his wealth to three servants. Each is given a different sum of money. Yet each is given a big amount – one fortune or two or five. Then the master leaves the story for a time. Notice that when he hands over the money he does so without any instructions.

After a long time, he returns. What has become of the life-story of each of his servants? Two of them have doubled what they were given. The third has done nothing at all. That one gives back to the master exactly what he received. Turns out, he had simply buried the treasure in the ground, a common security measure in ancient times. Why? He says he did so because he *feared* the master.

"I knew that you were harsh, reaping where you do not sow and gathering where you do not scatter seed; so I was afraid." What an absolutely perfect picture of how so many people think of God: fear, avoidance, minimal encounter having more to do with obligation than the sheer joy of being in God's presence.

The other two double what they've been given. The story suggests that this doubling is automatic. It’s not the cleverness of the servants that produces results so much as their willingness to be faithful to what they've been given. It’s about the *faithful use of our freedom……….and the kind of preference we give God.*

It is indeed the faithfulness of these two servants that the master commends, not their profits. He does not commend more highly the servant who produced five talents over the one who produced two. Each one is told: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

The fear that keeps a treasure in the ground is an act of atheism. The freedom that puts that treasure at risk – and may even result in loss – is an act of faith. We can learn from our failures. Our failures often teach the deepest lessons. But fear teaches us nothing.

The gospel stage is crowded with people of fear. They shock us into realizing that it is stupid and ugly not to trust God; it is stupid and silly not to put God first. There’s the snide elder brother who refuses to welcome home the prodigal son. There are the laborers who demand that late arrivals to the job receive less than what the day-long workers are paid. These are not examples of personal unity in love. These are gray, fear-bound lives. How sad.

Listen to Teilhard the Radical once again:

Try to grasp this: the things that are given to you on earth are given to you purely as an exercise, a ‘blank sheet’ on which you create your own mind and heart. The whole question is whether you have learned how to obey and how to love.

Life is about the *faithful use of our freedom……….and the kind of preference we give God*

Amen.

1. His feast day is April 10th. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ilia Delio, *The Unbearable Wholeness of Being,* Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2013, p.104 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)