

I remember I first heard this parable when I was 23 year old kid at Knox United Church in Calgary: I was a member of the church choir and a freshly minted elder on the session. It was the launch of the first ever “talent fair.” My future father in law was the minister, and he was preaching a fine sermon about stewardship, and how using our talents wisely can lead to their increasing for the benefit of the world. At least that’s what I remember. And then with great suspicion the church council agreed to distribute \$20 bills to anyone who wanted it, to see if they could use that money to do something that would make that money double or triple or whatever.

I took twenty bucks, knowing it would not cover the costs, and together with my friends produced a very amateur version of the off-broadway musical hit “The Fantasticks” in the church basement. It was fun, people lovingly showed up, it was my directing debut and we made some money for the talent fair.

Fast forward 18 years. I’m a newbie student minister in my training pastoral charge. It’s the autumn, this very same story is scheduled to be read in about six weeks, and using a direct steal from my father in law, I go to the church council and suggest a talent fair, using \$20 bills as seed money to kick start a variety of projects. They’re equally suspicious, but they do like the idea of lots of activities animating the life of the congregation. So the Sunday in question comes up. I preach a rousing, and probably pretty mediocre sermon on stewardship and two baskets of twenties are lined up to be distributed.

Half way through the sermon, the woman who rents the church’s house in the back shows up for worship. It often happened. She had three little kids, her husband was about 20 years older than she is, living on a disability pension and they lived at the financial margins. Whenever she came to church, she brought her kids, but they were always late, and always a little frazzled, the rest of the congregation always had the funny grimace – a cross between concerned for her, annoyed at being interrupted, and perplexed at why she came at all. On this particular morning, she’d missed the reading of the scriptures, and much of the point of my sermon; I think she heard the part where I invited people to take whatever amount of money they needed for their projects.

When it came to passing out the \$20, everyone came forward and took one of the brand new bills. This woman came last and she came to where I was standing. I watched her as she pulled out one \$20. Then she took two more. And then it was like she did some mental math, and slowly took not one more, not two more, she took three more.

\$120 in brand new twenties got folded in half; she stuck it in her pocket and sat down. The rest of the service continued and people loved how even our poorest neighbor participated.

On Tuesday morning, I had a knock on my office door, it was our neighbor...and she was distraught. I invited her to come in, to sit down and just talk. Crying, she said, "I took the money on Sunday because we had absolutely no food in the house and I had to pay the electricity bill or they would have cut it off. I don't know how I'm going to pay it back."

Sometimes things go right in ministry. Sometimes we're gifted with opportunities to get it right. I simply said it's okay; we don't have to figure that out at all. You did what you had to do to protect your family. I asked: "What's going on for you?" And I got to hear her story. It wasn't even all that bleak, she just ended up in a situation that meant she was living life the way she was living it...at the fringe of the community, at the margins of economic life, at the border, the edge, of our church family. She did ask about the story I told that day, the story of the talents. I'm not sure she heard it, but it was enough for that visit to help alleviate her fear and to find some support. She left and I thought, I've got some explaining to do to the church council.

The next day there was another knock on my door, it was my neighbor again. She was more relaxed and for the first time since I'd met her, I saw her smile. She looked at me and quietly said, "you know my husband and I make music together, he's a base player and I play the keyboard and sing. I write all my own songs." Do you think that maybe if we played one night at the church, maybe had a dance or something, that that's like that story you told?"

Three months later, we had a huge Valentine's Day dance, well huge for us. This woman got her family members to make all the refreshments. She single handedly did all the promotion, went around to all the local merchants and got door prizes. The dance sold out. Not supported by just members of the church. A lot of the town showed up. And it was a great night. Her \$120 produced nearly \$1000. And it was an awesome dance, the culmination to our talent fair.

Eventually, the church took on providing child care as needed, dropped off casseroles and other groceries every now and then. Her kids ended up going to camp every summer because someone in the congregation made sure of it. She sang in worship every now and then and became an active part of the church community.

I'll be disappointed if you think this text, this story that Stan read is about money and wise investment. At first blush the text is about money and large sums of it, and more than one stewardship sermon has been preached on this text.

I'll be disappointed if you think my story about the woman is about the church being a do gooder community. Not so. We all just got lucky that the money got returned. Had there been no music and no energy to produce a dance, I would still have had a lot of explaining to do to a suspicious church council.

My friend David Ewart doesn't think this parable is a story about the church at all. And he would say that the guy who hid his master's money did the most faithful of all according to Jewish law and tradition. David writes that this is a story that perpetuates an attitude of scarcity and empire, and that the rich will get richer. The master in this case, is not God, and Jesus is not supporting money making investment. Burying the money was a faithful act of protest.

In my mind, this story is about our response to the whole God, Jesus, church, bible enterprise. It's about the spirit that animates all of life and what we do to allow the spirit to move within us as we grow in love and trust, or what we do to block the spirit in our doubt and fear. This story is about abundance, extravagance really, and what we do with how we've been gifted.

A talent was a lot of money. It was the largest quantifiable measurement of gold. Each of the servants is abundantly gifted. Each of the servants is animated by something to do something with the money each received. Two guys behaved like investment bankers, not sure what motivated them. The third servant was certainly motivated by fear. Fear is the most debilitating of all human emotions. It stops us in our tracks. We cannot love, we cannot learn, we cannot grow, we cannot forgive, we cannot make peace, when we are afraid.

I've watched our own community in these past two years. I've watched individual people say yes to the Spirit in the most subtle of ways, letting go of the fear of ridicule, or criticism, or we've never done it this way before, and their lives are growing toward a more expansive relationship with spirit. They are beginning to make decisions about how they will live their lives based on a subtle turning toward the empowering breath of spirit. Something as simple as participating in a program called the spirituality of wine, or a provocative conversation at Waves, or receiving a prayer shawl from this community; or in the case of our neighbor receiving \$120 to feed her family.

Stewardship friends is not about money and how much you give the church, or make for the church. Stewardship isn't even about the use of our time and our talents. Stewardship is the active re-orienting of our lives in the face of all fear, that we might have our lives return to us in glorious abundance regardless of how much stuff we have.

The more completely we re-orient our lives, the more fully our lives return to us. The more fully we live in right relationship with ourselves, our neighbors, our planet, unafraid, the more peace-filled we become. This is the power of God's spirit active in our hearts. When we let it, there is nothing we cannot do. Amen.