

I'm going to begin with a warning and a disclaimer. Here's the warning: if Rich calls you on your cell phone first thing in the morning as you are on your way to work and tells you he's been thinking, say, "Good, Rich, that's your job," and hang up. Because if you let the call go any further, who knows what you'll get talked in to doing—maybe even preaching at all three services the weekend of November 15 and 16. Those of you who have been nudged or pushed out of your comfort zone by our beloved rector know exactly how I ended up here today. He tells you that he's not going to pressure you (he doesn't), that it really won't take much time (you go to all three services half the time anyway), and that it's an easy text (which I'm sure it is if you have a Ph.D. in Ministry). It won't be until later that he mentions that this weekend is called "Reminder Sunday" and you really look at the Gospel assigned, that you realize how very far in over your head you are. I'm not sure at what point I realized that my job was to use a parable that I've never really understood to convince people to bring their pledges in next week.

This warning is actually part of my disclaimer, of course, my apology that you won't hear the words of wisdom you have grown accustomed to in sermons at St. Francis from the likes of Rich, Jill, Darrell, and Mark Hatch. You'll hear nothing from Walter Brueggemann (whom I've grown to love), nothing from William Temple (with whom I disagreed last week, but that's another story), and nary a lyric from Bruce Springsteen. However, the good news is you'll only hear 1788 words compared with Rich's 2,416 of last week, and you may learn a lesson from two little boys named Sunveer and Moses. So, here goes...

In Rich's defense, he is right. This is an easy text from which to create a sermon on stewardship—if you are a fundamentalist. Let me draw on my Southern Baptist roots for a moment and give you the snapshot version of that sermon. The talents mentioned in the reading referred to money—and a sizable amount of money. The obvious moral of the story therefore is—take the money you have received by the grace of God and use it to make more money—and then, of course, give it all back to God (via your local parish). And don't miss that little "or else" caveat at the end (you know—the throwing into darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth stuff...). However, I'm not a fundamentalist; I'm an Episcopalian and an EFM-trained Episcopalian at that, so I'm always certain that there's more to the text than meets the eye and ear.

I actually read this passage back in September with the members of the Rite 13 group. Rite 13, for those of you who don't know, is a group of junior high students that meet weekly for Bible study and discussion. Many of them felt, as it's easy to do, that the third servant was treated a bit harshly. As children of the bike helmet, seatbelt generation they know about being taken care of and they know how to take care of things. Why, they asked, was he not a good steward? After all, he didn't lose any of the master's money. Isn't stewardship about taking care of things? Didn't the third servant protect the talents with which he was entrusted? My guess is that the text raises many of the same questions in your mind that it did for the young people in Rite 13. Tough questions and we came up with no easy answers.

We did agree that stewardship **IS** about taking care of things and often times about taking care of things that don't belong to you. One member noted that the parable seems unfair because you can't control what happens all the time. I was more than a bit impressed with his thirteen-year-old wisdom—I think it took me 40 years to realize I couldn't control everything in my care. And I think the mistake the servant made was exactly that—he confused stewardship with control. When we are asked to take care of something or someone, we are asked to do exactly that—take care, not take over. Protecting those and that which are placed in our care is part of the job, but we are asked to protect them from danger, not from growth. We are asked to tend to their care, to help them grow into their potential, not to shield them from opportunities disguised as risks.

Let me give you a concrete example. For many years, we had a secondhand couch and loveseat in our family room. We had picked it up at a yard sale or something when we moved to Holden. It was a bit beat up, but comfortable and the five of us spent countless evenings curled up on them watching games and movies, eating pizza and ice cream with assorted cats and dogs cuddled on our laps. However, as the years went by, and the kids grew into adult-sized beings, we were a bit cramped, so we decided the time had come to invest in something larger. We bought a very nice, roomy sectional—brand new—one of the only brand new pieces of furniture to grace our home. And I was determined to take care of it. So, it was delivered and I took the servant's lead—instead of taking care of it, I took control of it. No more eating or drinking in the family room, no pets on the furniture and for that matter, no one who has played hockey or worked in the yard recently on it either. I may be one of the few people in the world guilty of keeping a couch from its potential. Thankfully, my family responded by yessing me to death and then doing what they wanted (can't control everything!) and in short term the family room became exactly that again.

But we all do this, don't we? We do it with furniture, with fine china, with the good towels, our money, and sometimes even our prayers. We save them for something important, for something special, as if each day were not a gift from God. We have so much stuff and sometimes it seems the more we have, the more we feel a need to protect it. Mark Hatch called this “the curse of abundance” (I know, I said you wouldn't hear from him, but I love that phrase) and in so many ways it's exactly that. Our most prized possessions, those we have worked for and dreamed of and now have, become a burden as we spend more time worrying about how to hold on to them than how to enjoy them.

This is where Sunveer and Moses come in. Sunveer and Moses are two first grade boys with whom I have the pleasure of spending 45 minutes a day teaching to read (an activity which holds little interest for either of them). Sunny is a collector—he collects treasures—paperclips, pieces of eraser, broken pencils, tops of markers, etc. Moses is not a collector, but finds his joy in finding things before Sunny finds them. Needless to say, this often causes a problem or two. Last Friday they arrived in my classroom in full battle. Sunny was pulling at Moses saying, “Let me see it, just let me look.” Moses had his hands firmly in his pockets, guarding whatever was in there with his life—he also had the most beautiful smile on his face. I asked Sunny what was wrong and he said, “Moses has a diamond in his pocket and he won't take it out.” Moses then pulled out the

“diamond,” which wasn’t, of course, but it was a very shiny, smooth something, let me see it, and then thrust it back in his pocket. “Noooooooooooo,” screamed Sunny, “Why are you hiding that? It’s so beautiful.” (I wish I could do Sunny’s accent—it adds to the drama considerably.) “Please, Moses, just put it on the table. I won’t touch it. Stop hiding it!” (Sunny was almost in tears at this point.) Moses then said, “I’m not hiding it, Sunny, I’m saving it.” To which Sunny replied, “Same thing—you’re not letting it shine...”

And that’s the best interpretation of the Parable of the Talents I’ve ever heard. The truth is: stewardship doesn’t give us control or even ask it of us. Most things in life are just too uncertain. Many of us have been diligent over the last years in taking care of our money, socking as much as possible into our 401Ks; some of us have loving raised and cared for children, and in both cases—401Ks and kids—we learn that we don’t get to control things. Stewardship just asks that we do our best, that we do what we can to help our treasures grow into their full potential—to let all that has been entrusted to us shine brightly.

So, hopefully by now I’ve convinced you all to go home and take out the good china for dinner and let the kids drink chocolate milk on the couch—maybe even to let them go off to college and major in things with no job security or move across the country and get their own apartment in an earthquake zone. But that’s not the end of the story. It’s not enough to know how to be a good steward, we also need to know when we are called to be stewards. Sometimes it’s a compliment to be asked to be a steward—someone trusts you enough, believes in you enough to put their valued possessions in your care. But other times we’re asked to “take care” of an organization or a group by donating our resources and more specifically our money. Like many of you, I receive countless numbers of such appeals, and almost every one of them is for a good, worthy cause. However, it’s clear we can’t be stewards of everything—we have not the time or resources to take care of every organization. So, how does one choose? How does one discern whether he is called to be a steward? I found this question as challenging as the first. I kept asking myself, “Why do I feel a responsibility to share my resources with St. Francis? Why should anyone? How do you know for who and what you are responsible?”

I re-read the text and a bit before it and after it (you’ve trained me well, Rich), but found no answers. In the text, the stewards are just sort of assigned—the master simply hands out the talents and says, “Take care of this,” and I’m pretty sure assigned stewardship wouldn’t work with this congregation. It was when I asked myself how one knows what he is responsible for that words from my favorite book floated into my mind. “You become responsible forever for what you have tamed,” the fox tells the Little Prince in Saint Exupery’s classic. And “What does tamed mean?” asked the Little Prince. “It’s something too often neglected,” answers the fox, “it means to create ties. If you tame me, we’ll need each other.” And I guess that’s why we’re stewards here—because we’ve been tamed, we’ve created ties, and because in sometimes small and sometimes large ways, we need each other.

St. Francis Episcopal Church – The 27th Sunday after Pentecost
Robin Carlo, November 16, 2008

This is where my sermon ends, but I'm still almost a thousand words behind Rich, so I thought I'd give you "the rest of the story" —Paul Harvey style. In the midst of Sunny's fervor he tipped out of his seat and poked himself in the forehead with his pencil. This ended the battle and quickly quieted my little group. Sunny was scared and crying and bleeding quite a bit, so I sent him next door to the nurse's office and the rest of the group and I were able to return to the lesson. A few minutes later, a bandaged Sunny with a tear-streaked face returned to class. I watched to see if the battle would resume, but instead saw Sunny break into a smile. On the table, at his seat, was the diamond.