

WHAT WAS I MADE FOR?

Matthew 25:14-29

August 31, 2025

I've noticed a refrain on repeat lately. I've heard it at tables with many of you and read it even on the internet. It's usually accompanied by this existential sigh: *What are we even doing? What are we doing?* Beneath it is this deeper, more personal question: *What am I doing? What is mine to do?*

It's not just a question for young people to ask at graduation or when sorting out careers. It's the question we ask with fresh urgency when a diagnosis rearranges our futures, when success still leaves us feeling strangely empty, when loss leaves us unsure of our purpose, or when our nation reels after another act of senseless violence against our children. *What are we doing?* It's the question I think—and I hope—we bring with us to worship.

What are we to do? In so many ways, it's the human question. And it is the question that Jesus presses on in this parable of the talents. But it's one of those classic Jesus stories where he tells it so slant that we might need to look sideways to understand. So come with me for a minute.

Matthew tells us, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man going on a journey, who entrusted his property to his servants." Already the language of the kingdom of heaven should give us pause. This is our clue that we need not take out our notebooks to begin writing notes on managing our investment portfolio, but we instead need to prepare our imaginations for something far more mysterious than even money. Because there comes this shocking detail: One servant is entrusted with five talents, another with two, another with one. A single talent was worth about twenty years' wages. In today's terms, here in Indianapolis, that's roughly \$1.5 million for the one who got the least, \$3 million for the next, and somewhere near \$7 million for the one who received the most.¹

The disciples would have gasped. No master hands out that kind of money to their servants. Unless, of course, Jesus' point is that the kingdom of heaven is about some sort of sheer abundance. Far more than anyone deserves or could earn in a lifetime. The master entrusts his servants with more than is wise.

The first two servants—elated—get to work immediately. They begin trading with what they have been given, and they double it. The master returns, commends them, and invites them into his joy. But the third servant buries the talent. When the master returns, he hands back the talent untouched and says, "I knew you were a harsh man. I was afraid." And then the scripture goes on to tell us he was cast into outer darkness where there was gnashing of teeth. This story unsettles us. And I think it names three paths we know very well—three ways we often answer the question *what am I to do?* We might answer the question by:

1. Defining our lives by what we do not have.
2. Defining our lives by what we do have, our possessions.
3. Defining our lives by who we trust.

Let's begin with defining our lives by what we do not have. I picture the third servant watching the others receiving their allotment. Five talents for the other servant, two talents for the next—and then his turn comes. Just one. A mere twenty years of wages. A life-changing fortune, yes, but smaller than the rest. I can almost picture him staring at his feet, kicking the dust, asking this question: *am I not worthy of more? Is this who I am?* What should have been a windfall is suddenly a slight. *Is this all I'm worth?*

Each morning, as I put my dog's collar on, I say the same thing to her. She sits, and as I clasp that leather name tag around her, she hears these words: "You are loved. You are claimed. You are named, Xylo Payne."

It is silly, and I'm fairly certain she has no idea what I'm talking about. But I do. She knows the rhythm, and I know what I'm saying. I'm reminding myself of something that has been true about me as well since my baptism. True about all of us. This is who we are: children of God. Just as it was for that third servant, he was regarded as at least trustworthy of 20-years' wages.

So, Jesus gives us this tricky parable of a servant who does not see himself as his master sees him. Despite being treated as trustworthy, he doesn't believe it. He fears the very person who gave him this gift, but more than that perhaps, he fears himself.

And it reminds me of two of my high school classmates. They were the stars of our class at my arts boarding school. One in theater and one in dance. And we all could picture their names in marquee lights. But then it came time for us to audition for programs and apply to conservatories, and the results came. And both of them, at their prestigious programs of choice, were waitlisted, top of the list. They were told, "Just wait it out. Someone will step back. Someone will go somewhere else." But they made a pact, and together, they rejected their spots on the waitlist and instead went and got tattoos on their arms that read: "Potential."

And when we too define ourselves by what we don't have, by what we didn't get—whether it be opportunities, talents, means, power—we believe a false gospel that God has somehow skipped over us. We forget the innate, God-given things that have been entrusted to us. Right here. Right now. And here, fearful and self-flagellating, we won't even need to be cast into outer darkness. We'll be gnashing teeth all on our own.

It is no way to live. No way to spend what the poet Mary Oliver calls our "one wild and precious life." It breaks us off from relationship with the giver and with our neighbors.

Hear this: You are loved. You are claimed. Your name is known. And this God has entrusted you with far more than you could ask for or imagine. So don't bury it, wishing it was something different.

But sometimes we define ourselves in our lives by what we do possess. A sort of secular religion has snuck in, this

secular religion of accumulation. Ironically, the third servant the disciples would have recognized, as Jesus speaks of him, as obeying Rabbinic law because to bury treasure was an accepted way in their community to safeguard it and to actually free oneself up from the possession itself. To free oneself for faithful living. And it would have been investing it with the bankers that the disciples may have heard as a bit questionable, ethically and religiously. So, in some sense, the third servant was doing the "safe" or "righteous" thing. But it's the "safe" thing that became his undoing. He buried the talent because he was afraid of losing it. And in that hole, it sort of grows to define him. Burying him in fear, in darkness, and in isolation. Who would he be in the eyes of the master if he did not have this one talent to show for himself? Who would he be if not for that possession? The possession now possesses him.

And I see this echoed in the sort of rising secular religion where we ascent via a performative accumulation of stuff. Now there is a great deal of pessimism in our younger generations about our financial futures,² and according to Pew Research, in 2024 only 53% of Americans believe the American Dream is still attainable.³ I think that anxiety, this is an anxiety the servant would have known. He is after all a servant in financially precarious straights. This anxiety in our age, along with a rising materialism thanks to social media and the commodification of our time and attention, it sort of wiggled through the open holes in our social fabric to lead more and more people—particularly younger people—to believe our flourishing can solely be measured by individual financial success rather than our collective capacity for good.

Did you know that Americans, when compared with our behavior in 2003, are spending, on average, 1 hour and 39 minutes more time at home each day?⁴ Our homes have grown in size over the last many decades, and these palaces might be becoming a sort of prison where we hide from the risk of being defined by something other than what we possess or what we can project onto tiny screens. This parable seems to prod at this self-definition.

If we define ourselves solely by what we possess, we won't need to be taken into outer darkness. We'll already be there, shackled by our stuff, sequestered in our citadels.

But Jesus' parable offers us another way, and it's not found in the master's preference for risky investments. Did you see how the first two servants received their gifts? Did you notice the difference? When they return, they say to the master, "You handed it over to me..." Delivered, gave, the Greek tells us. They claim it as their own. They believed that the giver is generous, so even before he says so, "They have already entered the joy of their master." They receive, they risk, and they trust the relationship.

The tragedy of the third servant isn't that he failed to earn a return. The tragedy is that he never really received the gift at all. He always saw it, scripture tells us, as "his master's money." "Here," he says. "Take what is yours." He feared the giver, and he buried the gift. And what we believe about God, we see here, shapes everything. If we believe God is harsh, we will live cautiously, anxiously. We will bury our lives. If we believe that God is generous, that God trusts us, we will risk, and in risking, we will enter the joy of our creator.

If we believe what we are here to do is accumulate wealth for some ultimate accounting, we will waste our lives chasing a final balance we cannot pay. If we believe the kingdom of heaven is at hand, and specifically in our hands, we will get to work ensuring the hungry are welcomed at the table, the unhoused are sheltered by the care and community of Christ, and the vulnerable—which scripture tells us includes the widow, the immigrants, and the children—we will ensure that they are protected. That they are not buried by our distractions, our division, and our apathy.

For here is the gospel twist. In just a few days after speaking this parable, Jesus Christ himself—who I would argue is a talent of immeasurable worth—he will be buried. He will descend into outer darkness. Jesus himself will be handed over to a cruel master, to Pilate. He will be buried in the earth, sealed in the tomb, cast into the shadows.

But on the third day he rises. Which means even the outer darkness will be conquered by his Light. The grave cannot hold him. And so, when we find ourselves individually or collectively captivated by what we don't have or what keeps us from changing and transforming, or we've become buried by our possessions, or immobilized by our fear, he meets us right there. He pulls us up into the

light and says, "Friends, no longer do I call you servants. Behold, the kingdom of heaven is at hand. You can choose another way."

So what are we made for? What are we to do? What way will we choose?

We are not made for handwringing over what we have not.
We are not made for an identity of accumulation.
We are not made for fear.

We were made to trust the Giver. You were made to enter the joy. You are not tattooed with the word potential, but you are claimed in the waters of your baptism. You were made for relationship—with the One who claims you, the one who entrusts you with more than you could ever imagine, ever ask for, and then places you alongside a community of neighbors who you are called to risk in loving and laboring alongside in tangible and meaningful ways. Scripture tells us, "For if salt has lost its saltiness, what use is it?"

A little over a week ago, I was invited by one of you to learn more over breakfast about the work of a local organization here in Indianapolis, Recovery Café.⁵ At the café, in community, our neighbors navigating addiction, mental health challenges, or housing instability find belonging. At one point in the morning's conversation, the founder of this initiative laughed to one of our members, Jim McClelland, that it has taken a while to get to where they are. Jim's response stuck with me. He said, "Life's greatest accomplishments—and rewards—are a result of our long-term investments."

Friends, we are investing our lives every day, whether we're digging holes or building wealth or dividing our shares. So, we are taking a risk no matter what.

If we choose the path of sitting it out on the cynical bench that says we do not have enough of what we need, for ourselves or for the world to ever change, that's a risk. If we choose to live as if all that matters is financial gain, even at the cost of relationship and joy, that's a risk.

Or we can dare to trust that the accounting in the kingdom of heaven is stranger than any spreadsheet can capture, it is ruled by Christ who will go to the outer darkness to get us,

and that there is enough grace available for us to be foolish in the work of love.

Perhaps that's the risk we are made for. Perhaps that is what is ours to do in this time. To risk changing our minds in the name of loving the least, the lost, and the left behind. To risk a bad investment in the name of helping one in need of our generosity. To risk standing up, speaking up, when silence would be safer for us but will surely cast someone else off and us also.

We know, all too well, that we have buried too many gifts in the name of playing it safe. Just ask Jesus. It's time to put down the shovel. "Precious things have been [entrusted] into our hands..."⁶ And in the Kingdom of God, we know there is always more to come for those who we are willing to risk. Amen.

¹ Barbara K. Lundblad in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume II*.

² <https://kyla.substack.com/p/gen-z-and-the-end-of-predictable>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/07/02/americans-are-split-over-the-state-of-the-american-dream/>

⁴ Patrick Sharkey, "Homebound." https://sociologicalscience.com/download/vol_11/august/SocSci_v11_553to578_updated.pdf

⁵ <https://www.recoverycafeindy.org/> is an effort of We Bloom, a regional non-profit.

⁶ Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*.