

Advent Lutheran Church
Courageous Stewardship
July 6, 2025
Matthew 25:14-30

Happy New Year! Since we last gathered for worship, Advent Lutheran Church has started a new year of mission and ministry.

It is a joy to begin again together, recommitting to our mission of loving and living like Jesus and reconnecting with our purpose of being a growing church where all are welcome and discover ways to serve. And to know that the year ahead will bring considerable celebration of Advent's first 50 years.

While many of us have new year's traditions for the calendar year that we partake in each January, I imagine that very few folks have well developed rituals around the new Advent church year that arrives each July.

Earlier this week I tried to do something simple to mark the occasion. I took a selfie outside this sacred space and posted it on social media along with a short happy new year message. I figured it was the least I could do to celebrate.

And amazingly that simple message spread quickly! I received many more likes and comments than I expected. Of course, I must confess that the popularity was likely driven more by a mistake than the message. I managed to position myself in such a way that on first glance everyone assumed I had an outrageous new hairdo.

To celebrate this new year of ministry, I won't be encouraging you to follow suit. Rather than asking you to post awkward selfies, I'm inviting you to join me in resolving to lead a life of courageous stewardship.

The call to the demanding and countercultural lifestyle of courageous stewardship is presented in today's Gospel reading: the Parable of the Talents. This parable is the longest of all the

parables in Matthew's Gospel. And, it's a rich story packed with challenge, warning, and promise.

A little context . . . Over the year we've journeyed together, I've preached on many parables and this summer I'm exclusively preaching the parables. As a result, you're becoming familiar with the ways Jesus uses these stories to teach us about the kingdom of God. And, you expect that when there is a series of three people the twist or the big reveal will come with the third and final character.

Remember the Parable of the Good Samaritan? First came the priest, then the Levite, and then the twist arrived when the third and final character entered the scene: the Samaritan.

This pattern appears again in the Parable of the Talents. First comes the good and faithful servant who doubled the master's money, second comes another good and faithful servant who doubled the master's money, and then the twist arrives when the third and final character enters the scene: the wicked and lazy servant who buried his master's money in his backyard for safekeeping.

Wait a minute? Isn't that an unnecessarily harsh rebuke? After all, this servant received more money than he had ever imagined touching in his lifetime and made sure it was protected and available for his master whenever the master returned.

Except that this is a story about talents. Yes, the NIV talks about bags of gold, but the NRSV and many other modern translations choose the word talents instead. And, most English translations of this parable choose to title it "Parable of the Talents."

Since we've heard it read as bags of gold and I've mentioned a lot of money it is easy to connect the dots and determine that a talent was a large sum of money. More specifically, one talent was what a typical worker could expect to earn in about 20 years. Some modern commentators estimate that translated into 2025 dollars a talent could be worth close to one million dollars.

So instead of hearing bags of money or talents for this parable to be told in our day and age we should be saying something like this:

A wealthy business owner decided to step away from their stressful life for a break and deputized three employees to watch over some of their personal resources. He gave \$5 million to one employee, \$2 million to another, and \$1 million to a third, each according to their abilities.

The first invested in the stock market and had amassed \$10 million by the time the big boss returned. The second put the money into a new venture and it was worth \$4 million when the owner reappeared. And the third converted the \$1 million into \$100 bills, placing all 10,000 of them in nondescript bags in an unused room in his home where they remained until their owner came back to claim them.

The wealthy business owner came home and summoned the three. After hearing their stories, he commended the first for his courageous stewardship, then commended the second for his courageous stewardship, and finally expressing his disappointment in the third for his fearful inaction.

Okay . . . now we grasp the big idea of the parable.

Did you realize that most scholars think Jesus was telling a story about what his followers are supposed to do after he departs from the scene. It's about how you and I are supposed to live until Christ comes again.

And, we are not wrong to begin with finances. After all, Jesus mentions money or financial matters in about a third of his parables. Being courageous stewards of all God entrusts to us must include our finances.

But, Christian stewardship is much greater than what can be shown on a balance sheet. The very word talent that clearly meant a large sum of money back in the first century now primarily means a skill or ability in the twenty-first.

This is why I talked with the children and youth about knowing, growing, and sharing their talents with the world. God has given each and every one of us talents.

I wonder if you may have a talent or two that you've kept buried and not been using much of late. If so, perhaps this will be the year you dust them off and begin using them once again.

And, I wonder if you have a talent or two that you've been using sparingly or perhaps selfishly. If so, consider making this the year you go all in, using these gifts to help build a better world for all people.

I've been talking about talents – substituting words like money and abilities. These are just a few of many examples. What Jesus was focused on in the parable and what I've been trying to relate is the broadest possible understanding of stewardship – not just any stewardship, but rather courageous Christian stewardship.

It begins by acknowledging that all that we are and all that we have came from God. Our stewardship of all that God has entrusted, is entrusting, and will entrust to us is how we live our faith. We must be and become co-creators with God, disciples of Christ, and bearers of the Spirit.

At this moment in time when uncertainty abounds many people are living in fear and some are choosing to grasp whatever they own more tightly or even to lock it up so that no one can see it or benefit from it. Be warned: this is the very behavior named as wicked and lazy in today's parable.

I started this message talking about celebrating the new year. Happy New Year is a message filled with hope and marked by joy.

And this morning's parable highlights joy. The two people who doubled their master's funds while he was away received words of thanks, a promise that more will be given, and an invitation to share in their master's joy.

Siblings in Christ, as Advent begins a new year of mission and ministry, may we heed the call to live as courageous stewards and welcome the joy it brings.

Amen.