Stewarding Rather Than Preserving – **Matthew 25:14-30**
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I grew up as the son of a banker. And so by default, I was taught the importance of saving money. Ten percent of everything I received, Dad would say, should be saved. There were also mandates for giving and allowances for spending. But, a portion of every dollar should be saved. And of course, along with the imperative of saving came the lesson that the earlier one starts saving, the more money that will accrue over a lifetime.

And those lessons have pretty much stuck with me. I've been a saver, and not just a saver of money. I save things that can be preserved and used instead of getting new things. Sometimes to the detriment of my reputation.

While I'm not in any way a hoarder, I will keep things and use them as long as they're still usable. And I get ridiculed for this by people closest to me.

I have t-shirts and sweatshirts, for example, that are decades old. And I'm proud to tell Laura almost the exact date they came into my life. There's a Packers sweatshirt in my closet that I still occasionally wear. I got it sometime between 1996 and 1999. Yes, it pre-dates two marriages!

But it works, and I'm proud of it.

There's a plaid shirt that I wore on my 50th birthday. And it's still one of my favorites nearly seven years later.

And, by the way, some of you follow my lead on this behavior. I know this because I'm looking at you. And some of you wear things that are not of this century. I see you! God bless you for your commitment to preservation.

Every time I read the parable of the talents, I gravitate to the one servant at the end of the story who was a saver. He was given the one talent—worth in today's dollars what would've been around a million dollars—equivalent at the time to two decades of an ordinary laborer's wage.

He was given something so valuable that his nature was to only protect it. He was so in awe of it that he could do nothing else but bury it in the ground. The tremendous value of what he was entrusted with was not lost on him. He respected the talent, he respected and feared the owner of it who had entrusted it to him, and he valued it so much that he was a bit paralyzed by it.

And if I had been standing there witnessing this conversation take place, I would've looked at him and said, "I got you." Because ten or twenty years into the future, that talent was still going to be a talent because of him. All he had to do was take care of it. Putting it in the ground ensured it wouldn't be lost, would've been preserved for the owner to do amazing things with it.

The wisdom of that approach, the painstakingly cautious approach of this servant that guaranteed the talent's preservation was not met with the same admiration that I or maybe you would have had for it.

Upon his return, the owner of that talent greeted the servant with accusations of being wicked and lazy, being unwilling to invest the money like the other two servants had, unwilling to risk it for a better return. He was demanding a riskier portfolio at a time when the servant saw the wisdom of playing it safe.

In money and retirement planning today, we would've called the third servant's strategy wise if we are getting up there

in years. To do anything else would be considered too risky, too reckless.

The master's issue here is not that this servant failed to double the amount of money, but that he simply had chosen to do nothing with what he had been given.

And that lesson rings loudly for us, not from a financial standpoint, but as individual servants of the Lord and as communities of the faithful.

Not doing anything with what we have might be a good preservation tool, but sometimes it's not good stewardship.

One of the assets we have that we focus too much on preserving at times is our good memories—memories of the people in our lives that are so dear to us. Memories of the kids growing up, of our spouses when we were just married and getting started in our lives together, memories of our siblings when we were growing up together.

When we lose one of those special people, though, we sometimes do all we can to preserve that person's memory that we are paralyzed from moving forward without that person. Being a good steward of that memory, on the other hand, might invoke taking some sort of action that would honor his or her memory—engaging in an activity that was special to him or her, acting on his or her values by engaging in something that he or she would be proud of. That's stewarding rather than just preserving.

The same thing happens when we remember the way our treasured institutions like the church used to be decades earlier. We might remember the bigger crowds or the wider impacts of our churches, clubs, and neighborhoods back then. And we've spent the decades since clinging to that memory hoping that just

preserving the way we've done things will return us to what we think were the glory years.

And so we never change the furniture (furniture being mission or strategy or resources or sometimes actual furniture) in hopes if we just hang on long enough the way things used to be will come full circle and we can embrace that same prosperity we remember. Not likely.

Stewarding instead of preserving means putting our talents to use to meet shifting needs. A gift can be protected so carefully that it never gets to accomplish much of anything. Sometimes we value so much what we have but fail to use it for fear of losing it.

Here at FPC, I'm proud, and you all should be proud too, of the ways in which we've not buried our talents here in the last dozen years. In the last dozen years, we've given over a million dollars to mission causes that assist us in fulfilling God's mandate to love our neighbors. We've invested in that same time period over two million dollars in people, our church staff who lead us in ministry. And during this time, we've literally changed or are changing the furniture throughout the building to ensure it's a welcoming place for members and guests.

And in a whole host of other ways, we've changed our strategies for teaching, worshiping, and serving our community. As good as we remember it being here at one time, it's not necessarily that way today. But it's still good, and that's because we haven't sat and done nothing with what we've been given.

And this is the mindset we should continue to embrace—not one of sitting and preserving, but moving and stewarding. As much as it might pain us to put something of what we have at risk, we should keep moving, keep trying, knowing that the risk of failing is always part of our stewarding.

The song the ensemble is going to do here in a minute is called "Made for More." And just the title itself lends to a mindset of not settling, not sitting, not preserving.

I know who I am, 'cause I know who you are. The cross of salvation was only the start. Now I am chosen, free and forgiven. I have a future and it's worth living. 'Cause I wasn't made to be tending the grave, I was called by name, born and raised back to life again. I was made for more. So why would I make a bed in my shame when a fountain of grace is running my way? I know I am yours and I was made for more.

It's a song that really can be boiled down to being good stewards of who we are and what we have. We are chosen, free and forgiven. Because of this, we have a future and it's worth living.

I love taking what I've been given and saving it. If it's still good, after all, why get something new or do something new? But putting it in the ground doesn't do me or anybody else any good. There's something good in store for that investment. Like you and I, it is made for more.

That's what the owner of the talents was getting at when he found this third servant having done nothing with what he had been given. It's not the size of the gift that matters. It's what we do with it.

There's wisdom in playing it safe at times, but because we have been blessed with much we should also steward it and not just preserve it.