

A Community of Transformation
1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Matthew 25:14-30
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Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister, most known as an author of novels, spiritual memoirs, and imaginative books about biblical characters. Buechner was born in 1926, making him 94 this year. Lately I have experienced a longing to draw from his wisdom, the many moments he has written assuring words about how grace is present in our lives. As one reviewer noted, Buechner's writing regularly affirms that God is constantly at work in our everyday lives.¹

For "daily grace" to be an element of Buechner's legacy is actually astonishing, given the tragedy that marked his early years. Buechner has written openly about the fear accompanying his growing up amid his father's alcoholism and his parents' faltering marriage. When Buechner was 10 his father committed suicide. A few months later, his uncle did the same. His early novels were filled with characters who exhibited, in one biographer's words, "a typically modern-affluent spiritual and moral vacuum, deeply isolated from one another beneath their genteel pleasantries and polite deceptions."² Not raised in the faith himself, Buechner came to faith as a young adult in New York City, when his restless spirit met God through the sermons of a famous preacher, George Buttrick. Buechner went on to attend seminary, be ordained, and served as a teacher and chaplain in a boarding school before becoming a writer full-time.

The mix of grace and pain, fear and hope are present in his sermons. In one Easter sermon he imagines the Resurrection's presence in the world as a little girl in a red dress flickering in and out of a black-and-white movie, a flame of God's Spirit in a world of grey. Throughout his sermons, like in his novels, Buechner tells stories, his own stories, because, he says, it is in the particularity of our stories that God makes Godself known. As we journey through this time when our stories feel upended, interrupted, even threatened, my soul has stretched backward to people of faith who tell sturdy stories, who have also walked the treacherous path toward God, who remind us again that life holds pain, hope, red sparks among grey world, and grace.

Now today is Stewardship Sunday, a day in which we typically celebrate our commitments to Grace for the year ahead. In many a previous year, this morning is a festive one, with special musicians, a moment to come forward and make a mark of a giving tree, and certainly there would be extra goodies at coffee hour. Stewardship Sunday is a day of possibility, excitement, a ringing declaration of what God is doing in our church, in our lives. Instead, this year, today feels more like the muted resurrection celebration of a girl in a red dress, one tiny, flickering in-and-out flame amid a grey, grieving world.

¹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/hope-through-grace>. Accessed November 12, 2020.

² <https://biography.yourdictionary.com/frederick-buechner>. Accessed November 12, 2020.

Matthew's gospel has offered us the perfect stewardship scripture; the parable of the talents, in which three servants, receiving an unfathomable gift, trade up these talents to make more for their long delayed but returning master. The message of the text is clear: we have all been given some type of talent, some gift for the world. Take what you have been given and use it to build more treasure for God's kingdom. It's an industrious, positive, get yourself to work message . . . which would be perfect if we were wandering a trade show, appearing before a talent scout, sitting at our desks as college freshmen, or in one of our previous stewardship Sundays.

Matthew, however, is not writing to upscale investors but to frightened, grieving, hoping-but-also-doubting Christians, whose faith is so new to the world that they feel they are but a tiny speck of red in a grey world. And Matthew writes not to encourage them to use their talents, but to strengthen them, framing their efforts as one part of our waiting for the end of time.

This parable is the third of four parables, right in a row, about the end of time. Last week came the bridesmaids falling asleep at the bridegroom's delay. Next week will be the searing "where were you when I was hungry, naked or in prison?" The early Christians thought Jesus's return was right around the corner, and now are having to readjust their understanding of how to live in the long delay. We call these stories eschatological ones, which means simply they are about the end of time. It's not fashionable to talk about the end times. Such discussions veer into the speculative or outrageous. Yet the world we inhabit is finite. Those things that we see, hear, taste, and experience will end, and what comes at the end is God. What might change about how we inhabit these days if our sight line shifted to God's ultimate end, God's triumph of goodness, healing, and life?

The master is leaving for a long journey. Three servants are given "talanta" – a coin that is the largest denomination of currency in the first-world system. James Howell suggest "we should translate talanta as a huge bucket full of solid gold," such a large sum of money that the servants would have had no idea, really, want to do with it.³ The point is not to calculate how much money, how many years of labor each pile of talanta represents, but to see it as an immeasurable gift poured into your life – a gift of passion, family, strength, or saving message of the gospel – or all of these things - rolled into one thing: your life.

Two servants trade what they have been given, multiply their treasures. The parable's focus, though, is on the third servant, who buries the treasure, a typical act of prudence in that time, in order to hand it back unaltered to the master upon his return. As he does so, he receives the harshest condemnation.

The servant's explanation for his actions offer clues to such judgment. I was afraid, he confesses, and so I hid your talent. I heard you were a demanding master. I knew you expected something from me. I was scared. The servant is condemned for not taking a risk, for being

³ Howell, James "What Are Talents: Matthew 25: 14-30" in *The Christian Century*, Vol 122 No. 22. November 1, 2005. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-11/trojan-horse>. Accessed November 11, 2020.

paralyzed into inactivity. Here is the sin of being cautious, getting tripped up by how enormous the gift is and worries about possibly failing, for creating distance between you and the gift entrusted to you, even though a gift generated by a generous, extravagant God would intrinsically generate a good return.

Frederick Buechner relies upon this parable to risk speaking about his own life. Writing of his father's addiction, he names how he buried the pain such experiences brought to him. It's a survival instinct, he acknowledges, saying,

“Hard and terrible things happen to us in this world that call us to be strong and brave and wise, to be heroes, when it is all we can do just to keep our heads above water. So we dig the hole in the ground, in ourselves, in our busyness, or whatever else we dig it, and hide the terrible things in it, which is another way of saying that we hide ourselves from the terrible things. It seems unfair to blame us for doing it as it seems unfair to blame the third servant because it is a way of keeping afloat, yet the words of the parable are devastating – wicked and slothful is what the master calls the third servant – wicked for burying what he should have held to the light and slothful because playing it safe is another way of not really playing it at all.”⁴

To unbury the treasure, says Buechner is to trade it, to share the treasure of our lives with others, not closing ourselves in fear but opening up to life in risk and hope. It is in this space, continues Buechner, thinking of his own fractured family, that we are given the chance to be brave, kind, wise, and even, reconciled, and healed.⁵

You might wonder why I bring Buechner's analogy into a stewardship sermon. Quite simply it is because I believe it holds a message for us right now. It's tempting to bury the pain of these days, this year – pain of deaths, separations, fears accompanying ordinary activities, of wondering if things essential to our life together have come unrepairable. But if we bury the pain and cower in the fear, then we inevitable bury, as Buechner rightly names, the joy, honestly, kindness, empathy, and the hope for any healing from this terrible year.

Furthermore it is your ability, as people of faith who know they have been given the deepest treasure, that is the presence of the God of life, to **trade** rather than **bury** your lives, that has marked the ministries of Grace this year. You have shown up for racial justice. You have helped create a space of community in our parking lot. You have showed up for one another. You have been generous, kind, truth-tellers, and builders of God's world. What is being traded here at Grace is a community of transformation. A community where faith is understood not to be a private comfort zone, a non-risky venture, but a sharing of lives in risk, in pain, in hope, knowing that what we offer one another is nothing less than the gift of God's self to us, even as we endure the long delay to the fullness of God's beloved community.

⁴ Buechner, Frederick, *Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 214.

⁵ *Ibid*, 212.

We have it in us to be Christ to each other, proclaims Buechner. We have it in us to work miracles of love and healing as well as to have them worked upon us. This is what we commit ourselves to today: to be a community of transformation, Christ to one another. May it be so. Amen.