

When commentators explain the parable of the talents, some use the word “talent” in its English meaning, as something we’re good at doing, or a special capability with which we’ve been gifted. The message of the parable is clearly then to use the gifts we’ve been given for the greater good. Others explain the parable by pointing out that in antiquity a “talent” was a very large amount of money. The message then becomes “support the mission of the church and use your money for good.”

Both explanations are just fine, but both also suggest deeper meanings. A “talent,” however you interpret it, is something very precious, like a treasure. Used properly, it’s capable of producing enormous good. Unused, it produces nothing, or worse. Perhaps in the bigger picture the word “talent” might represent something far more important than money or natural ability. The meaning of the parable is then altogether different. Let me tell you a tale or two, and let’s see what those deeper meanings might be.

When my youngest daughter graduated from high school I gave her a little paperweight with a message engraved on it that said “What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?” It has served her well over the years. Many of her friends have commented about it, when they’ve dropped by her place for a visit.

Most of them have observed that what we mean by failure is that things didn’t turn out quite the way we thought they would. Sometimes it’s no big deal, and other times it’s an expensive, five-star disaster. Upon reflection, though, most of her friends agreed that real failure is caving in to fear and not attempting to do anything at all.

Today’s Scriptures seem to say pretty much the same thing, but I’d suggest to you that when we hear this parable in the context of the overarching message of the entirety of Scripture, the kind of failure being described is about more than simply not doing “anything at all.” It’s much more specific.

To begin to discover what's meant, let me tell you about a story that's unfortunately not read much any more these days. Back in 1908, the brilliant American author Henry James wrote a short novella entitled *The Beast in the Jungle*. It's about a man by the name of John Marcher, who shares with his friend, May Bartram, that he had the "sense of being kept for something rare, strange, possibly prodigious and terrible." He felt that this destiny lay lurking before him in the mists of his future like a crouching beast in the jungle, waiting to slay or be slain.

May asks him if the event could be falling in love, but Marcher denies this; he has already been in love, he tells her, and it has not been overwhelming enough, in his opinion, to be the grand event. May asks him if he is afraid, but he says he does not know. He asks if she will watch with him for the big event, and she agrees. The novella then describes their waiting, which continues until May Bartram dies, with Marcher never having allowed May to get close to him.

At the end of the novella, Marcher discovers that the rare, strange, prodigious and terrible event that he feared lay waiting for him was to have thrown his life away, having never returned the love of the one person who had stood by him all along, accepting his peculiarities and loving him simply for who he was.

A prisoner of his own self-absorption, Marcher realized that the he had been in the grip of the beast's jaws all along. The novella ends with some of the most chilling lines in literature. James wrote: "The escape [from the beast] would have been to love her; THEN he would have lived.... She had lived...since she had loved him for himself, whereas he had never thought of her but in the chill of his egotism.... He had justified his fear and achieved his fate; he had failed, with [unparalleled efficiency, thoroughness and precision]." Marcher had learned the hard way that the only real failure in life is not to love. If you choose to bury that treasure, expect to be buried along with it.

Each of us has been given an enormous treasure by God, visibly and materially present in the Eucharist we share: the ability to give and receive love; to be able to love ourselves, those with

whom we share life, and God. Taking the risk of investing in love exposes us to delight, difficulties and outcomes quite different than what we might've thought would happen, but the returns exceed our ability to comprehend or express adequately.

Conversely, to bury that precious treasure of love, out of fear and self-absorption, never allowing it to multiply, is the dark side of the gospel parable. Such a choice exposes us to the rare, strange and terrible grip of a beast in the jungle that I fervently hope no one here ever encounters, for it is the choice not to love or receive love from anyone – ourselves, others or God.

Henry James' novella tells of the love of a good woman, just as our first reading today tells us what a precious treasure such a woman is. I have the awesome, utterly unmerited privilege of being married to just such a woman, and I know that many of you men also share just such a blessing.

I'd like to invite you now to bring that Scripture passage to life, right here, right now. It's your choice to do so or not, of course – that's totally between you and the beast in the jungle. So, if you wish to do so and she's here with you, please take a moment right now to honor that good woman in your own life, be she your wife, your mom, your grandma, aunt, daughter, the Blessed Virgin Mary or anyone else. A hug, a kiss, a "thank you" or all three will do. If for any reason you can only do that in your mind right now, that's perfectly OK, just close your eyes and imagine the good women in your life acknowledging your expression of love and cherishing you right back in the same way. Carry the warmth of that love with you when you come up to receive the Eucharist, for the love you just expressed to an individual reflects in some small measure the love of God for all of us that's made visible in the body and blood of Jesus Christ we share in the Eucharist.

Even if your circumstances only allow you to watch right now, take in what you observe, and understand that every gesture of affection is another investment in love, and the payoff on talents invested like this is both immeasurable and eternal.