

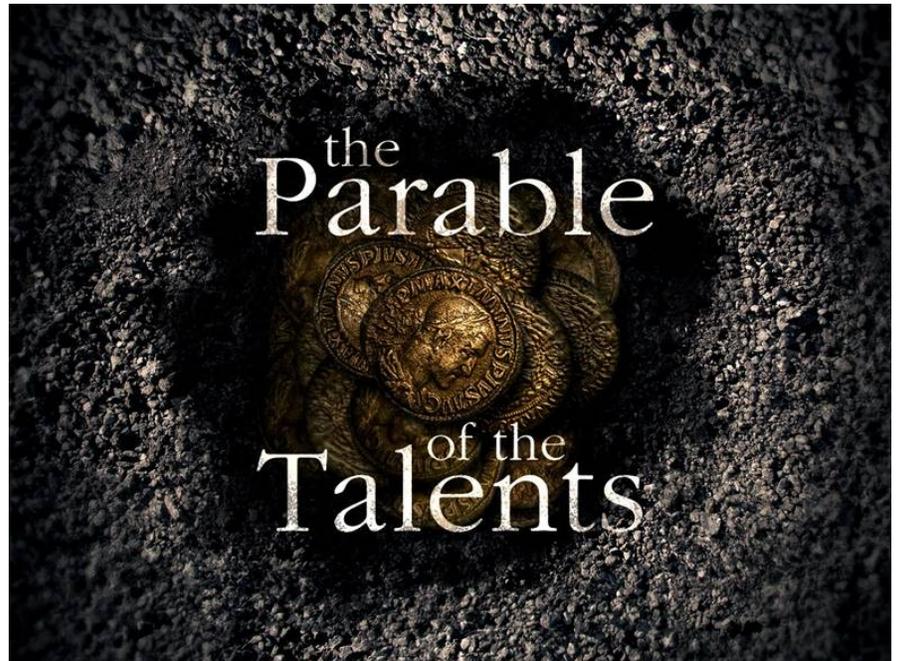
## *On Contracts and Covenants*

*But the one who had received the one talent  
went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.*  
(Matthew 25:27-29)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, **October 21, 2018**  
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Jesus' *Parable of the Talents* deals with the management of one's gifts, the treasure with which one has been entrusted from the Master, and I don't mean merely treasure of silver and gold, though certainly that. Rather, I mean all our talents, all our spiritual gifts. This parable teaches us to exercise those gifts, using them and sharpening them for the glory of God.

It's an interesting parable, to be sure, and by interesting I mean, uncomfortable. I suppose we might say that a parable of Jesus enters the citadel of our heart like a Trojan Horse. However much we may welcome its arrival, watch out, for deep within the belly of the parable we may have given admission to something unexpected and unwanted.



The *Parable of the Talents* is a prime example. We welcome its arrival. How pleasant its theme, this master entrusting responsibility to his servants as he departs for a journey. Upon his return, his courteous nature quickly surfaces, rewarding with lavish praise the first two servants, whose wise investments have accumulated profits. *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant, you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things. Enter into the joy of your Master!”*

Brace yourself, though, for with the master's harsh response to this Third servant, the parable sours. Which of us, after all, can't see a bit of ourselves in the cautious reticence of this Third servant who, while not perhaps as self-reliant as the other two, was at least safe? Here is no recklessness such as that more famous parable of Jesus, the Prodigal Son. The prodigal's reckless behavior was forgiven, the wandering son found and received with joy, the fatted calf

slain for the celebration, dad's Tail Gate party welcoming the son who had wasted all in riotous living. If such a conclusion is fitting for the prodigal, why not for this Third, whose only crime, far from being wasteful, is to have been, well, overly careful?

No wonder we hear this parable with a bit of discomfort, for in this Third we see something of ourselves. It seems hardly evil, the path chosen by this Third, sheltering what has been received, safe-guarding assets?

Jesus doesn't present him as a thief, hinting at not a shred of dishonesty. True, he possesses no entrepreneurial bravado, but what transgression resides in that lack? Granted, he may not land in the Fortune 500, but neither will he be scattered among the wreckage of the precarious.

Now, let's explore what Jesus might have meant by this upbraiding of the hole-digging servant. He said, "*You wicked and lazy slave! You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless servant, throw him into the outer darkness, where they will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*"

Could we have heard that right? Will Jesus have us understand the Kingdom through the words of a master who would say such things? A perplexing parable, to be sure, and troubling. The way I want to approach it, as you see in my title, is by contrasting the concepts behind the words "*Contract*" and "*Covenant*."

What are the differences between a *Contract* and a *Covenant*? Well, there are several ways, I think, to express the difference. For example, we usually think of a *Contract* as being a legal obligation, while the word *Covenant* brings us into the realm of moral and spiritual obligation.

For this reason, a *Contract* is bound by the passing of a set period of time, where a *Covenant* has no end in sight. The phrase "*Eternal*" *Covenant* is biblical, but who wants to sign an "*Eternal*" *Contract* to, say, buy a house or a car or a boat? You might think when the time comes for the payment each month that you've signed your life away in an eternal contract, but you haven't. Contracts have an end in sight.

A *Contract* is a secular instrument, an agreement in which a list of expectations spell out bare minimum requirements of both parties. A *Covenant*, by contrast, is a sacred trust, an agreement by which covenanting parties are brought into relationship, expected not to offer bare minimums, but the very best of themselves.

***Contracts have to do with business.  
In business, bare minimums are spelled out.***

***Covenants speak of relationships.  
In relationships, bare minimums are never enough.***

A *Contract* is intended to reduce risk. Should you borrow money to purchase a house, the contract you sign protects both you and the lender, spelling out what each must do and what happens if either violates the contract. A contract reduces risk for lender and borrower.

A *Covenant*, on the other hand, increases risk and vulnerability. I say, for example, to a congregation at a wedding, “*The covenant of marriage was established by God,*” rather than, “*The contract of marriage was established by God.*” There may be a contractual element to marriage, of course, but marriage is always MORE, a *Covenant* that increases emotional vulnerability, the vulnerability inherent in relationships of love and trust.

Rev. Paul L’Herrou tells of coming home from work and seeing what looked like a formal contract held by magnet on his refrigerator signed without his knowledge by his wife. He smiled when he read, “*Peanut Butter Lasagna – Grandma and I will make it together when I turn 5.*” The *Contract* was duly signed by both parties, grandmother and granddaughter.

The humor in that story is the blurring of the distinction between *Contract* and *Covenant*. Here was what looked like a formal contract, but it was really expressing something that a contract can never guarantee, which is love.

Love requires a covenant. What was really being said? “*I love you and throughout your life I will continue to love you, my acts of generosity and grace toward you will always abound and I look forward to many more days of joy in our relationship, not because of a Contract, but because of an Eternal Covenant.*”

**A Contract will never do when a Covenant is required.**

I think the reason we find ourselves so uncomfortable with this parable is that Jesus, like that grandmother, has intentionally confused these two arenas of *Contract* and *Covenant*. This servant was viewing his master, and the treasure he had received from his master, in a *Contractual* way. He was claiming that his actions were to protect himself, to reduce his risk. “*I knew you were harsh and cruel and would, if you could, take advantage of me. I was afraid of your severity, so I hid your money.*”

When fear becomes our motive for our giving, we act as if we are under a formal contract. “*I knew you were harsh and cruel and demanding.*” If that’s our view of our giving to the church, we’ve lost something vital. Our quest then becomes defining bare minimums of giving rather than experiencing the joy of generosity based on a covenant of love.

Can you imagine standing at the altar and saying in your vows to your spouse, “*I love you, but let’s be clear. You need expect no more from me than bare minimums!*”

**You see, a Contract will never do when a Covenant is required.**

When one joins a United Methodist church, that person makes a vow. That vow is not the signing of a *Contract*, but the declaration of a *Covenant*.

This membership *Covenant* is an affirmation that together they will participate in the church's ministries in five ways: *Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service, and Witness*. That's not a contractual bare minimum, but a *Covenant* opening us up to more giving of ourselves in love than we can now imagine. This is precisely what grandma's covenant was saying, to her granddaughter, "*I will make that Peanut Butter Lasagna with you, and I will love you beyond that in more ways than you can now imagine! We are going to have so much fun together, and neither you nor I can now imagine what is in store for us as we give ourselves to one another in love.*"

The *Estimate of Giving Cards* you've received this week and will celebrate on Commitment Sunday next week are not contractual but rather affirmations of a *Covenant* with God based in love and gratitude for God's gifts. Your gifts support the mission and ministries of a vibrant church alive in the grace of God.

If as a church we desire no risk, no vulnerability, then we would do as this Third servant, simply dig a hole for ourselves and hide away. But that's NOT Christ of the Hills Methodist Church, a church with a legacy of visioning that requires bold decisions and actions to achieve.

Thanks you, dear friends, for being a part of this faith *Covenant*, for using your gifts in a way that helps us grow in ministries that impact souls both within and far beyond these walls!

