A World Full of Superheroes

Matthew 25:14-30

<u>Intro</u>

There are literary variables that, when thrown into any story, have the likelihood of diverting your attention from the point that is trying to be made. This morning's passage is able to illustrate this assertion in a wonderful way.

We about to hear a parable from the lips of Jesus as he speaks to his disciples on the Mount of Olives (just beyond the city gates of Jerusalem), not long after he has emerged from the Temple where he has proceeded to verbally berate the scribes and Pharisees up one side and down the other. Included in this course criticism is the understanding that Jerusalem rests upon the rim of destruction, if not literally, then most certainly figuratively. This causes the disciples to ask the question, "tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" This question allows Jesus to begin a series of parables (or short stories with double meanings) that focus upon how we need to remain diligent in our alertness.

The problem shows up, however, in that the short story that we are about to hear uses money as the foundation upon which the previously mentioned point is made. This inclusion has thrown many people off the track as to what this story is all about: I know that it has with me. Instead of hearing the message that is being spoken, we end up focused on the whole money thing.

So here is the warning that I give to you: the passage that we are about to hear talks about money. Just remember, that even though it talks about money, the story is about something so much greater. The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saving. 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten

talents. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

"A World Full of Superheroes"

So we all know that my son Austin likes to sing, so the fact that he is singing one song or another is not a surprise. But there usually is a reason behind the tune he's letting be heard. For example, for the last six months or so, we would hear him holler out, 'ah, ah-ah...ah.'

On a loop he would sing it.

So, first things first, can anyone name that song, or at the very least the artist? That's right, Led Zeppelin's, Immigrant Song.

Now, why would Austin be singing that song, besides the fact that he clearly has great taste in music? For those of you who follow movie previews, you know that the latest Marvel super hero movie 'Thor: Rangnarok' has that song as the backdrop to 2 ½ minutes of action filled bliss.

Austin, like his brother and father before him, is all about the superheroes. But as shocking as it might be to believe, prior to these characters being on the screen or all shapes and sizes, they were printed on paper, and that's how I first got sucked in (because let's be honest, when you're singing the song that you hear on the preview...you're just a little sucked in!).

Now the stories that I read were all over the map but at the end of the day what you ended up having was some sort of superhero who had to step up to the plate in order to save the city, the world, the universe from some villain who threatened to take it over or, even worse, destroy it. In almost every story, the superhero used their power to make sure that didn't happen.

However, and this happened with almost every story, there came a time when the superhero, for whatever reason, didn't want to use their power anymore. They pretended that there was nothing that they could do, or that their ability was actually more of a curse. Most times the characters wanted to be 'normal', like everybody else. These story arcs could last over several months and plunged the world into deeper and deeper turmoil as the world wondered where are Spiderman, Thor, or Daredevil? Why are they allowing the evil forces to defeat us?

Invariably, the superhero would finally recognize that to not use the special gifts and abilities that they had was to be the people they were not created to be. The skills that they had were meant to be used, not buried away. This realization would then allow the world to be saved, and evil to be defeated. As I read this morning's passage, and I realized that this question is not limited to the pages of comic books.

On the surface, it feels like Jesus is talking about money and how we are to use it. This makes sense. The inclusion of the Roman monetary unit, the talent, which, at our best guess, is valued at around 1000 of today's dollars, trips a mental switch that immediately makes us think about our wallets and how we make use of the contents that are contained therein. If this is the perspective that we carry with us to this passage then I would imagine that many of us, myself included, would start getting a little worried because while the last servant may not have been the smartest individual out there (it seems rather obvious that to put it in a savings account would be safe and kick back some added benefit in the form

of interest), his inaction certainly does not seem stack up to an offense worthy of his master calling him 'worthless' and to 'throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'.

If we look at this passage from the perspective of money, placing ourselves in the position of the servant, and God in the role of the master, then we begin to wonder what God thinks about what we are doing with our financial resources. If God is looking at what we are doing, or not doing, and is about to get upset and throw us into a place of, 'darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth', well, that's an incredibly disconcerting place to be.

However, as we talked about in the introduction, this parable, especially within the greater context that is placed, is not talking money. It is using money to talk about how the interests, skills, and gifts that we have been blessed with are not meant to be buried away. They are to be used, and used boldly.

This transition of thought is made a little easier in that the monetary unit that is used, the talent, actually contains the root word for the word talent that we use. Now, instead of being focused on our pocketbooks, we are now forced to examine how we use, or don't use, our "special aptitudes" or "gifts".

Let's hear the story now, with the characters shifted around, just a little bit: "God summoned his friends and entrusted the entire creation to them; to one he gave five special skills, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. The one who had received the five talents went off at once, used them, and through using them, multiplied them so that five other individuals began to use their talents to glorify God. In the same way, the one who had the two talents helped two other individuals to use their talents. But the one who had received the one special skill went off by himself, pretended like he had no special skill, and never used it."

Once the monetary connotation is taken out of the equation, this passage becomes a commentary on how believers, who have been blessed by God with a wide variety of gifts, and skills are sitting on those talents because they are afraid: afraid of failing, afraid of not living up to some artificial standard that has been created in their minds, afraid that others will not appreciate what they can do.

In that moment, we become like the superhero who decides to sit on their special skill and not use it. Even though the forces of evil may not be moving to take over the world as in the comics and now the comic book movies and shows, the world is most certainly suffering because we have not stepped up to the plate and put to use those "special aptitudes" that we have been blessed with.

Stop being afraid of failing, for even if you do, you will learn something that will ultimately lead to an even greater success. Very few advancements were made in this world without their first being a long list of missteps. What we need to remember is that while the mess-ups may sting in the short term (and they do), the successes will be so much more valuable (and memorable) in the long run. God did not bless you with skills, interests, and talents so that you would be able to realize how horribly inept we are. He bestowed those gifts so that we would use them, so that the kingdom of God is advanced in this plain of existence, so that we might be shown how valuable we are to the world, and most certainly to God.

A few days ago, Jen and I were flicking around the TV dial and ended up stopping on a 'Mysteries at the Museum' on the Travel Channel. It's one of those shows that provides quick and interesting stories...and can easily be fallen asleep to. I was trying for the latter...and I ended up with the former.

The particular story detailed a portion of the story of Alfred Nobel. Does that last name sound familiar?

If you went to the Nobel Prize, you are correct, as it was his wish that at the end of his life a foundation be formed to award distinguished advancements in the worlds of chemistry, literature, physics, medicine, and ...peace. That's how we know Nobel today.

But back in the 1800's, Nobel was known as a Swedish inventor, chemist, and businessman with 355 patents to his credit. His most famous invention? Dynamite.

When a local newspaper screwed up and wrote his obituary, instead of his brother who had died a few days prior, his world changed. Here's why, the obituary described him as, 'the merchant of death' due to the fact that he created dynamite and its (more powerful) successors. He looked at that and began to worry about how he would be remembered. So, unknown to most of his family, he set most of his ample estate up in a trust that would fund awards that served the betterment of humankind,...which included peace.

As far as I am concerned, Alfred Nobel is absolutely a version of superhero, but not because he did something that was beyond his means. All he did was use the gifts that he had been bestowed with, the resources he had earned, and put them to use in such a way that others were lifted up. I don't know whether he would have considered himself as such, but I think of Nobel as an agent of God.

The thing is, if this is the definition that we now work with, then the world is full of superheroes, people blessed with unique and special gifts.

The other night I watched a news report of a woman in the subway who told the man she was sitting next to, to give her a little more space as he had infringed upon her seat. He promptly started yelling at her and even hit her in the face. As his voice began to raise a man across the subway car stood up and interjected himself. He spoke calmly and firmly and grasped the man by his wrists. He told him that he needed to get off at the next stop...which is exactly what happened and a situation that could have been horrible became an opportunity for a superhero using his skills and gifts to emerge.

One other example: I was at Shop Rite yesterday and it was a little...tense. Apparently, Thanksgiving is coming? In any case, it was remarkable to see how people would respond to folks who would extend courtesy, kindness, and a smile: it would defuse the tension that had people running around like a turkey who had heard that it was invited to dinner. When people showed care for others amazing things were able to happen.

There are people who save others by stepping in the way, by being prepared, or by using their incredible intelligence. Nobel was ultimately called into service in his unique and memorable way, but the reality is that all of us have been called. Lets put those special attributes, those God given gifts, those unique powers to work, for as we do not only will the world be benefited but the glory of God will be revealed in ways that we once thought were impossible.

Whether you realize it or not, the gifts that you have been blessed with, when used as God would have them be used, allows you to become something that you once thought was only contained within the pages of comic books: you can become a superhero. Take that step out in faith, quit being afraid to fail, and realize that with God on your side the glory of God will ultimately be revealed. A world full of superheroes. It can happen if we all begin to use the gifts that we have been blessed with.

After Sermon Prayer

O Holy Lord, You have blessed us in so many good and wonderful ways. We have so many gifts to share with the world. The problem is that too many times we try and hide those special attributes, we try and bury them in the depths of a psyche that says we are not valuable, that we are not worthy, that we will fail. God, work in us to help us to understand that this is not the case, that the gifts that we have received are to be used, and used boldly. Lead us to all step from beyond the shadows so that the entire creation might be able to recognize that the world is full of superheroes, and we are all empowered by You.

Congregational Prayer

Thank You, gracious Lord, for the hope in which we live – that despite the lack of peace and security in the world, we know that You provide us with a peace that surpasses our understanding. Enlighten us with the confidence we seek, that our salvation is secure through our Lord Jesus Christ. Bless us with certainty, so that we may be ambassadors of Your love and caretakers of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We come to You now with the prayers of this congregation as we are able to find them in the prayer list this morning. We pray for (**Give List**) We also pause so that we might be able to approach You in the silence of this building. Lord, hear our prayers as we come to You now. (**Long Pause**)

Lord, we thank You for this time of prayer, for all of the ways that You have blessed us, for all of the ways that we are able to use these gifts so that the world might be bettered and Your blessed name acknowledged. We pray in Your name. Amen.