

## Merit Badges

Between last week's sermon about being prepared and this one titled merit badges, you can probably sense that I had a connection with the Boy Scouts of America. I was a den leader, a Cub Master and the mother of a young man who earned an Eagle and a daughter who on her way to a Silver Award discovered Flag Line in high school. For many years scouting and its underlying principles and its goal oriented structure was a very present factor in our home. Wayne was also there for the Cub Scout journey and then was a leader with the Boy Scout Troop to which Tony belonged. I am not sure I would have made connections to scouting with this parable without a commentary by Alan Brehm I found posted in a blog called the Waking Dreamer. Dr. Brehm begins speaking of his experiences as a Boy Scout and the system of ranks and merit badges which you earn and then display on your uniform sash. He relates how he likes that type of system—there are a set of requirements and you do them and then you can check them off and get your reward—the next rank or a badge to place on your uniform sash. That system of checking off requirements to get a reward is appealing to most of us—if you do the tasks, you are sure of your reward. And there have been many who have looked at this parable and drawn a similar inference about the kingdom of God. When thinking about this parable it is helpful to remember its location—not just as a teaching of Jesus to prepare his disciples but about its presence between two parables teaching about the time when the master was absent—and the time when he returns. Last week's parable was about the wise and the foolish ones—those who were prepared for the return to be delayed and those who weren't and the indication that the unprepared would not be recognized and allowed to enter the feast indicating an aspect of judgment. The text which follows this one is not a parable, but it is a teaching about what happens at the return of the Son of Man; it is definitely about judging what has been done in Jesus' absence by those who claim to follow him. Today's parable is about that time when the master is absent and what his servants do during this time. There is an interpretation of this parable that it is about what disciples do with the talents they are given—Under this version, the "talents" are abilities that you have been given to invest on behalf of the kingdom, and if you don't use them you lose them. This is often tied to stewardship season to exhort the faithful to use what God has given them. Again this seems to be like the requirement/reward system. In fact this interpretation has been so popular that the term "talents" has been applied to—well—talents like singing, entrepreneurship, carpentry, or a whole list of things we can do. But I find it hard to reconcile that message of use it or lose it with the message of Jesus about grace, mercy and forgiveness. It is especially hard to find God's grace in the ending of this parable when the one given the least, who then hid it until he could return it, has even that taken from him. Additionally, he is then cast out into darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. If you identify with the ones who received more, then you may see good news in this parable. But if you identify with the one receiving only one talent—there seems to be no good news here for you. If we go back to the context in which this parable sits we see that Jesus is teaching his disciples about what he expects from them after he is no longer with them. The parable begins with a man preparing to leave on a journey. He calls his slaves together and entrusts his property to them. He does this individually—giving varying amounts to each according to his ability. Two things to note about this opening information.—First, a single talent was equal to about 15 years of labor for a servant. In other words—even the one given a single talent was given a fortune. The one given

5 talents received an astronomical amount of money. This master's actions were extravagantly generous in what he entrusted to his servants. And perhaps entrusted isn't the best translation of the Greek here. The verb is more often translated a "to give or hand over" and seems to imply "giving up control of". This aspect is emphasized when after a long time the man returns and asks for an accounting of what was done with what had been given into their hands. Like the delayed return of the bridegroom there is a certainty that there will be a return, but no defined amount of time set for the return. The report of the one given 5 talents was that immediately he had traded with them and had essentially doubled the amount and was now in possession of 10 talents. The second servant given the two talents had also doubled what he had received. The response of the master to both of these people is: "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." While "pistos", the Greek word here can easily be translated as trust, it can also be translated as meaning faith—and often was in earlier translations like the King James. Since, unlike the Boy Scouts where trustworthiness is a foundational principle, the foundation of the church whose basis is the Gospel—then what Jesus is praising makes more sense as describing faithfulness. The three different people in Jesus' parable, with different levels of "ability" were given resources for building up the Kingdom of God, and two showed "faith" and one didn't. This parable shows the element of risk that is endemic to the call of God. God always asks us to step out of our comfort zone and act out of faith, not fear. It's what God expected of Noah when he told him to build an ark and collect animal. It's what God expected of Abraham when he told him to leave his father's house and go to an unnamed place. It's what God expected of Moses at the burning bush. It's what God expected of Mary when he sent the Angel Gabriel to visit her. It's what God expected of Paul after knocking him off his horse and blinding him. Had any of those figures acted out of their fear of what would happen, fear for safety or security, fear of failure—then our book of faith, the Bible would record a very different story. And the difference between the two slaves who risked what they were given and the one who dug a hole to protect it—that difference was fear. The two had faith in the generous nature of their master; the one succumbed to fear. That's why the clarion call of the scriptures from beginning to end is "do not be afraid." We are called to be people of faith, not people of fear. In this story, until the return the only thing we can tell about the landowner is that he is incredibly generous. Those who received the most from him showed no fear and risked what they had been given. The one who received the least, although it was still amazingly generous, had a different perception of his master—that he was harsh, reaping where he did not sow, and gathering where he did not scatter seed. Yet the manner in which he has dealt with the first two seems to contradict this assessment—those who risked what they received keep it and what they have added to it. It is only the one who has not risked anything that has what he was given taken away—and it was given to the one who had risked much, not kept by the master. This parable tells us that God is generous. It also tells us that God has expectations for us—that while we wait for Jesus' return we live life in a faithful manner. That living in a faithful manner will require some risk taking on our parts—doing things that are outside our complacent, comfortable way of dealing with the world. If we view God as primarily an enforcer of rules, then we, like the Pharisees, get hung up on the legalism of religion—the checking off of requirements. On the other hand, when we view God primarily in terms of grace, we are surprised and uplifted by the numerous gifts and moments

of grace we experience all around us. And when we imagine God to be a God of love, we find it far easier to experience God's love in our own lives, to share it with others—even those whose ways of life are unlike our own. When we look at others do we see threats or imagine conflicts? Or do we see an opportunity to learn, a problem to overcome or a mystery to be embraced? Because again and again, our experience of life is so very deeply shaped by our expectations. Could it be the "talent" we have been given so generously is the message of the gospel itself? Could it be that we are called to risk being a faithful witness to that good news by the way we live in community with others while we wait for Christ to come again? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.