What do you hear when you hear this parable?

Coming up, as it does, in this spot during the year, a time of year that's 'stewardship season' across much of the church, a pretty conventional read (and one I've heard many times) is that we must put to good use all that God has entrusted to our care, our time and our talents, and our financial resources.

But this gospel's original hearers were centuries away from thinking about annual parish budgets, and the needs of various parish committees or ministries. The first hearers of today's gospel lived in such a different time and place, such a wildly differing reality to our own, that a straight up call to put to good use 'the stuff' of our lives - our money, our education, our professional experience, our free time – this would have been pretty meaningless to them.

When we think today about what this parable might mean, it's important to consider where, in Matthew's telling of the Gospel, this parable comes up. This is the third of four stories (we'll hear the last one next week) that Jesus shares with his disciples before heading off to his arrest and his death.

Jesus will be leaving. And he offers the disciples these four parables, teachings about how to live until he returns.

So, aware of what our 21st century minds might assume about this parable, let's also reach for what it's original intent may have been.

The man in this parable, like Jesus, is going away – his preparations, before leaving, include entrusting his property, that which is his, to those who aren't going with him.

He summons his slaves.

In Jesus' time, it was common knowledge slaves were the property of their master, they belonged to their master. The master of the household had great power over their lives and their future.

Each slave, in the parable, is entrusted with a huge amount of money.

A single talent, back then, would have been the equivalent of about 15-20 years'-worth of salary for a paid day laborer, an ordinary person, the kind of people Jesus' first disciples were.

The man in the parable entrusts a great deal of his wealth, his money to these slaves.

And here's the thing about big sums of money - it doesn't take too much for a lot to become a whole lot more. Vast wealth, even banked with just a modest percentage of return, will grow; if it's out in the world being invested, traded, circulated, being put to work intentionally and creatively it might balloon.

These slaves are starting with this kind of advantage.

In order for the wealth *not* to increase, literally the only option would be to dig a hole in the ground and bury it. When you start with a lot, ending up with even more just isn't that hard.

When the man returns, he settles accounts with his slaves. The first two have doubled what was entrusted to them. The man is so delighted he gives each one power in his household over many things, just like he has, and he invites these slaves *into his joy*. Though they're still slaves, they still belong to him, they're invited to participate in the life of their master.

This isn't simply a reward for doing a good job, this is a complete transformation in the way these slaves will now live, as part of the man's household, they will participate in the celebration, they will be part of the feast, they will have a seat at the banquet.

The third slave will not. When it comes to his accounting for the master's great wealth entrusted to him, the slave says that his own beliefs about the man, about what kind of master he understood him to be, his own fear, of his master and the task itself, this all had him bury his master's wealth while he was away, it didn't see the light of day.

Afraid of making a mistake, taking a risk, what might happen, the third slave figured he'd just give it right back, give back exactly what he had received; and to us, perhaps, this seems fair, he didn't lose any of it, after all. This plan was safe, and risk-free.

The returning master, though, is furious, he judges the slave and ultimately casts him into outer darkness where there is wailing and gnashing of teeth. There is no seat at the table for this one.

This is a parable. Its details are intentional hooks meant to draw us in so a truth might be revealed.

Jesus was sharing this parable with his disciples, and all of them knew only too well the brutality of the social systems of the day, the inherent inequity of an economic system that massively advantages the already wealthy, and they knew only too well the brutality and violence of punishment within the household system. Jesus uses their familiarity with these realities to make his point.

Jesus is *like* the man who's leaving, Jesus is going away, and he will be back. And his disciples, we baptized Christians, are entirely *his*, belong to him.

Jesus' wealth, true wealth, has nothing to do with money. And, like the slaves in the parable, the riches he's entrusting to his disciples, to us, could never possibly be earned.

Jesus is entrusting vast amounts … of the love of God, his love, while he's gone, knowing each person will do very different things with what they're given, based on who each person is.

The 5 talents in the parable would have been enough monetary wealth to substantially change the trajectory of many, many lives, as would 2, even a single talent would have had enormous lasting impact. Jesus is saying, God's love has that kind of power to transform lives.

And the quantities, the amounts of that love are so vast that the love will increase if it's out there doing something in the world, even a little bit of effort will yield a "sizeable return."

But, if Jesus is misunderstood, or if we're afraid of the task, fearful of being responsible for what's been entrusted to us, afraid of the risks this love might have us take, figure it's ok just to hold on to it … there's a warning here of the consequences of hiding it away until it can be given back, just as it was received.

Even if we're afraid, we're to do something – even if all we do is 'bank it,' give it to those we trust, even this will have God's love grow.

The love of God has been poured into our hearts,[1] entrusted to us, while he's gone. We have been given what he knows we can manage.

This love can change our lives and the lives of those around us.

Like monetary wealth, *this* wealth, when it circulates, when it's shared, when it's given away, can make incredible, remarkable world-changing things possible.

A life focused on increasing this wealth will have us build connections, networks, develop relationships, even and especially when it's hard.

For the sake of this wealth, this love, we're called to put the time and effort in to grow what we've been given, to see opportunities even (or especially) amongst those who don't love us back; to walk with those we don't agree with; to stay at the table with those we might even consider our enemies.

This kind of wealth can have us believe anything is possible in its name and for its increase.

Jesus is saying, you all understand the power that money has in this world to change everything, understand God's love like that. God's love is the wealth of the kingdom; this is the wealth we're called to focus on, this is the wealth we should be obsessing over, be driven by in this life.

[1] Romans 5:5

And we don't do this for our own selves, because we are his, our lives his.

We do it because he's asked us to, it's for the building up of God's household, so we might participate more fully in the life of God's kingdom.

This is how Jesus wants his disciples to live, God's love the wealth to live for.

So the question on this day is what are we doing, what could we do with the love he's entrusted to us?