

## Taking Risks

Matthew 25:14-30

Our Scripture reading today is one of three parables told in Matthew 25. The first is about the 10 virgins awaiting the arrival of the bridegroom that Clay spoke about last week. The third parable is about God sorting out those who served Him and those who did not in the last days. Those both seem to be pretty straight forward stories. Today's parable is one of those that has had me scratching my head for years.

Today's story is introduced in the Bible as the Parable of the Bags of Gold. This makes sense since the "talent" referred to in the parable was an amount of money equal to about 15 years' worth of wages for a day laborer. A fair amount of gold, I'd say. That's not the part that has me scratching my head. It's how the master responds to the slaves. I think it might be helpful to break this story down step-by-step to get a clearer understanding of what Jesus was trying to get across to his listeners, including us.

The story begins by telling us that the master, before he left on a long journey, gave talents to his slaves. To each he gave according to their ability – 5 to the first, 2 to the second, and 1 to the third. So, it would seem that this master is familiar with the slaves and has entrusted each with what he believes they can each handle successfully. We learn that

slaves one and two go to market and in trading are able to double the amount of money entrusted to them by their master. Anyone who has dabbled in the investment trade knows that doubling your money in any length of time can be very risky. Not knowing when the master was to return these two were taking some extreme risks with the talents entrusted to their care. What if their investments had not paid off? What if they lost everything? Fortunately for them, they did not lose and actually gained a good return on their investments. The third slave took a different approach and buried his talent in the ground where it did not diminish, but it also did not gain anything in the time the master was away.

Upon the master's return he called for an accounting from these three slaves. The first two upon presenting the gains they had made to the master were commended, given promotions, and invited "into the joy of your Master." Although they had been entrusted with unequal amounts of money, they were equally rewarded by their master for making good investment of what had been entrusted to them. The third slave, however, upon presenting to the master what he had been originally given received a much harsher response from his master. The master took the one talent and gave it to the slave who now had 10 talents, as well as casting out the slave for not taking any risk with what had been entrusted to him.

You might wonder what might have happened to the two slaves who doubled their money had they not been successful in their ventures. Knowing from what the third slave had to say about the master, reaping where he did not sow, we might surmise that even if the others had lost everything he would have commended them for at least trying to grow what he had entrusted to them. But is this story just about investing money and making a profit? Not likely.

It's placement with these other parables and the fact that Jesus was approaching his final days, it's more likely that this was meant to impress upon his disciples what they would need to do going forward. As disciples of Christ ourselves, this message is for us as well.

John Buchanan in his commentary on this parable says this:

The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is not to risk anything, not to care deeply and profoundly enough about anything to invest deeply, to give your heart away and in the process risk everything. The greatest risk of all, it turns out, is to play it safe, to live cautiously and prudently. Orthodox, conventional theology identifies sin as pride and egotism. However, there is an entire other lens through which to view the human condition. It is called sloth, one of the ancient church's seven deadly sins. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity, playing it safe, investing nothing, being

cautious and prudent, digging a hole and burying the money in the ground. (Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).)

John's comments about sloth hit a nerve with me. Have you noticed how sloths are becoming popular these days? They are used in advertising, they are made into huggable stuffed toys for children, there is a boom in sloth-related marketing, from clogs to coffee mugs adorned with cute, furry sloths. Even the sloth from the movie Zootopia is experiencing a return to popularity as a meme following the election. If we are taking our lead from sloths, we may be in trouble.

Jesus' message to his disciples was that they would have to risk everything, the exact opposite of being slothful. The Biblical record tells us that the disciples took that to heart as we have many stories of how the early church mothers and fathers risked everything, even death, for the cause of Christ.

But what does this say to us today in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? For most of us our personal faith has not seemed too high risk, has it? We hear stories about other Christians around the world who suffer harassment, imprisonment, torture, and even death for their faith, but that is far removed from where we are. Being people of faith is pretty safe here. For many, if they think the right things and do their best to avoid "bad" things – thoughts or behaviors, then they feel that life is good.

Jesus has other ideas for us, though. We are invited to live our lives as fully as possible by investing ourselves in our faith, by taking risks, by stepping out of our comfort zones into new adventures. It's not enough to simply believe in Jesus, it's all about following him in word and deed. We are to actively invest ourselves – body, mind, and spirit – in service to Christ. It is to reach beyond what is comfortable, to care deeply about what Christ cares deeply about, to risk what we have for what Christ has for us.

Like the slaves in today's Scripture reading, each of us has been given "talents" according to our own abilities. What we do with those talents speaks volumes about who we are as followers of Christ. As I was writing this the words to "This Little Light of Mine" started running through my head. "Put it under a bushel, NO, I'm going to let it shine." These talents are not just for us, but for others that God puts in our path.

I have been told that I write fairly well and am a good speaker. Those talents can be used in a number of ways, including serving as a pastor expounding on the Word of God. But for many years I was unwilling to risk getting up in front of people to speak. "What if people don't like what I say? What if I say something wrong? I know I don't speak like other pastors, so do I even qualify for the job?" All these fears kept me from fully investing the talents God has given me. Now I think I'm somewhere between the two slaves that doubled their money and the slave that buried what he had been given. My hope is that in time I will

move closer to where there will be a full return on the risk that I have taken by choosing to stand before a group of eager faces sharing what I have learned about what Jesus expects of us.

Each of you have talents gifted to you by a loving God. Don't worry that you don't have the same talents as the person sitting next to you. God has given to each "according to their ability". Whether you have 5 talents or only one, God has given them to you because He is trusting that you will make a good investment of the gifts you have been given.

Debbie shared one of her talents with us this morning. The gift of music is one I wish I had, but I don't. I'm blessed to know people who have this particular talent and are willing to put themselves out there for others to share their gifts.

I encourage all of us to look at ourselves and take an inventory of the talents God has given us. And don't say you don't have any because He has given to *each* according to their ability. Don't compare yourself to your neighbor, they aren't you and won't have the same special blend of talents that you have. Once you have identified your talents, ask God to show you how He would have you invest them for His kingdom. Then go out and invest BIG, take the risk, and you will be rewarded by the master when he says:

<sup>23</sup> “... ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’ Matthew 25:23 (NIV2011)

AMEN

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