

JESUS SAVES; WE'RE CALLED TO INVEST

Sermon, November 19, 2017

Text: Matthew 25:14-30

There was a very cautious man who never laughed or played ...
He never risked, he never tried, he never sang or prayed.
And when one day he passed away, his insurance was denied
For since he never really lived ... they claimed he never died.

One can't really live without taking risks. The parable today tells us about a cautious man, a man who didn't like to take risks ... a man afraid to fail. According to our Gospel lesson, though, failure is not defined as making mistakes. According to this parable, failure is defined as breaking even.

You may know the story about the young man who enlisted in the 82nd Airborne. He was about to be assigned to their jump school, so he eagerly asked the recruiter what to expect. "Well," the recruiter said, "Jump school is three weeks long." After a pause, the young soldier asked, "OK, what else?" The recruiter replied, "The first week they separate the men from the boys." Another pause, and the recruit asked, "OK, what else?" The recruiter replied, "The second week, they separate the men from the fools." Again, a pause. The recruit asked, "And the third week?" The recruiter replied with a grin, "The third week, the fools jump." You see, the 82nd Airborne wants fools who will take the risks. They want "fools" who will dare to jump and risk putting all the training and skills and talent they've been given into use! It's only such "fools" who are really of any use to the 82nd Airborne, and, incidentally, it's only the "foolish" who will go on to gain the exhilaration and the glory. By contrast, a story is told about a French Army campaign in 1956 to recruit badly needed paratroopers for service in North Africa. On one of the busiest streets in Paris they placed their poster, which read: "Young Men! Join the paratroopers of France. It is more dangerous to cross this street than to jump with a parachute!" Someone scribbled at the bottom: "I would gladly join, but the recruiting office is on the other side of the street!"

Again, in today's Gospel is a man who didn't want to cross the street, he didn't like risk, a man afraid to fail. In this story of Jesus the master comes twice, first to give his servants a trust, and second to see what they did with it. He is planning to go away for a long time and entrusts a huge fortune to three of his most trusted servants. The footnote in our pew Bibles is a bit misleading; it tells us a talent is worth more than \$1,000. Well, that's technically true. According to other sources I've read, a talent was worth a WHOLE LOT more than \$1,000! In that day's currency, a talent was worth six thousand denarii. As mentioned weeks back, one denarius, 1/6000th of a talent, was a standard day's pay for a skilled employee, and it was also the standard daily wage at the time for a Roman soldier.¹ It would take twenty years working six days a week to earn just ONE talent. I've been here at Greenwood nearly twenty-one years, so you might say I've earned the equivalent of one talent ... and you have paid me a lot more than just \$1,000 over the past twenty years, as understated by the NIV footnote. Anyway, the sums in this parable are huge! One servant is given five talents, the equivalent of a century's wages, the other two talents, forty years worth of wages, and the other one talent, two decades worth.²

It's not too hard to see what Jesus is getting at in this story. He is the Master who is about to leave, and He is going to come back. In the meantime, He is placing some really good resources into the hands of His servants, resources and blessings He wants them to use. He trusts His servants as mature, responsible human beings by giving them opportunity to take initiative with His riches and says, "See what you can do with this." And then, like a first century Arnold Schwarzenegger, he says, "I'll be back." In Jesus' story, a talent is money. Lots of money, in fact. But the parable isn't just about how we use the money we are given, although it certainly includes that. The word "talent" has a double entendre in English; in fact, the etymology of the current usage of talent can be traced back to this familiar parable of Jesus. A talent can stand for whatever gift or skill or riches God has invested in us.

Jesus says the first servant "... went at once and put his money to work and gained five more." The same with the second servant, who took his two and doubled them. The words are aggressive, active. They *went out*. They *crossed the street*. They *risked*. They *worked*. And they *gained*. The words portray two industrious and conscientious servants who jumped on the Master's investment with zest and commitment. What is pictured in this parable is the time between the Master's leaving and the Master's eventual return. This period is not to be spent passively waiting around for the Master to come back, nor is it characterized by merely inward spiritual pursuits. This critical period is a time to work with speed and zest and vigor and risk, because *the Master wants something done with His goods*. He wants the lost found, He wants the hungry fed, He wants the poor helped, He wants the grieving comforted, the unloved

¹ See September 24 sermon at <https://greenwoodchurch.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/getting-to-work-2017.pdf>

² See <http://www.dubiousdisciple.com/2011/10/matthew-2525-how-much-is-a-talent.html>

loved, he wants the shut-in visited, he wants children raised well. In short, he wants his servants to use these talents to advance the Master's interests in all areas of life, and these two represent those who get out and *do* it.

Now we come to that third servant, the one who just buried the money in the ground. Now, in fairness to him, we have to remember there was no FDIC insurance. It was far from a risk-free investment to even open a savings account. In those days, it was quite common to bury money. Some would consider it the prudent thing to do, especially with someone else's money. Jesus pictures a servant whose most important overriding consideration was *safety*. This is the kind of man who probably wore suspenders *and* a belt; he was not going to take any chances on anything of value being exposed. No risks! Gotta protect that money! So, he took the money and put it in a hole. He did not put the "money vehicle" in *drive*; he put it in *park* and left it in the garage. He kept it safe. However, even burying money in the ground is risky ... as Jesus said earlier: "*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.*" You could bury treasure in the ground and it could rust, decay or corrode. Or, someone might see you bury the treasure and wait until you were not around and dig it up for themselves. Or, if you're like me with car keys, you could forget where you buried it and never be able to find it again! There's a sermon in itself here, but harkening back to my opening little verse, there is no way to live well in this world and avoid taking any risks. When you love someone, you are taking a risk. When you have a child, you are taking a risk. When you decide on an occupation or a career, you are taking a risk. You just can't avoid risk without seriously stunting your life.

Verse 19, "*And after a long time the Master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them.*" The first two are so happy to see their returning Master. They are enthusiastic; they are eager, even giddily so, to see him and to show how they have used his trust. "*Master, you entrusted me with five talents (or two). See, I have gained more!*" These servants feel good, they are proud of their work, and it has been great fun for them to see their Master's investment grow. The Master enthusiastically responds, "*Well done!*" They have shown themselves trustworthy, and we are told they are then given even greater trust, greater responsibility, and a greater share of the Master's happiness. The obvious principle here is that when we are faithful in investing what we've been given, or in putting to work what we are gifted to do, we are given even greater trust, greater responsibility, greater skill, and a greater share of the Master's happiness ... not to mention a greater sense of purpose and fulfillment and personal satisfaction.

The third servant then comes up to the Master, probably still brushing the dirt off of his talent. "*Master, I knew that you were a hard man. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.*" That servant gave the money back, proud he had *not* taken risks with it. But to his surprise, he was judged harshly. Now, isn't being cautious good? Well, not when one is so cautious that one does *nothing at all*. The Master condemns such "caution" for what it is ... it's laziness at best, and it's wickedness at worst. But isn't prudence a virtue, especially when investments can be so risky? Not when prudence turns into selfish, short-sighted, self-centered ... even wicked ... hoarding at the expense of the greater good. This last servant took the Master to be a hard and demanding man to be feared, even though the Master was generous enough to entrust twenty years' wages into his hands. What he does with the money he is given displays he doesn't really know and understand the Master at all. The fear of God, says the Bible, is the beginning of wisdom. There is the healthy fear, which is reverence; there is the unhealthy fear which is really faithlessness, because it does not trust God at all and expresses itself in unwillingness to take risks and put to work what the Master has given and just leads you to bury your gifts, your potential, your opportunities, your talent ... in a hole.

One final thought: Another very human tendency is on display, here, and that is the tendency to think that our little bit doesn't count. Maybe this one-talented servant thought he was less talented, less "gifted", than the others, but remember the value of just one talent ... it has great worth! Maybe some of us may think we aren't as gifted as others, maybe we think we can't do what others do or we can't give what others give, and because we think we can't do what someone else can do, or give what someone else gives, we can actually wind up doing nothing or giving nothing at all! But it's not how much we are given that's key, it is our willingness to put to use what God has entrusted to us. No matter how little your "talent" may seem to you, use it, risk it, put it to work, don't bury it and sit on it! And I guarantee you it's the risk takers who are having all the fun and sharing in the Master's happiness, it's the risk takers who are growing in faith and experiencing God's pleasure! And in the gracious economy of God, when you faithfully invest your God-given talents, whatever they may be, not only do you keep them when you use them, you actually gain more. Don't bury what God has given you. Put it to use! Good use.

(The following was edited out due to time constraints; I include it here -- slc: "The parable ends with a little hook. 'Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has ten. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.' That seems like a hard statement, but to any keen observer of life it makes perfect sense. The people who use their gifts end up with more. Use it or lose it. Unused muscles atrophy. Unused talents damn.")

God and the 82nd Airborne delight in fools who will take the risks, who will get up, cross the street, jump out and invest the skills, training and blessings we've been given!