

JESUS SAVES, SO WE INVEST
Sermon, November 15, 2020
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 cannot really live without taking risks. I think that's something we need to be especially reminded of today.

Jesus' parable today tells us about a cautious man, a man who didn't like to take risks, a man whose life seemed almost governed by fear. You may remember the story I told the last time we looked at this parable, 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, so 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 risks. They want "fools" who will risk putting all the training and skills and talent which has been invested in them to use and dare to jump! It's only such "fools" who are really of any use to the 82nd Airborne, and, incidentally, only such fools 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 risk, he didn't want to cross the street, a man who was afraid. 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 entrusts a huge fortune to three of his most trusted servants. In that day's currency, a talent was worth six thousand denarii. As mentioned a month ago, 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 for a Roman soldier. It would take twenty years working six days a week to earn just ONE talent. (As I've been here at Greenwood nearly twenty-four years, I've earned the cultural equivalent of just a bit more than one talent over the entire course of my service here.) The sums in this parable are huge! One servant is given five talents, the equivalent of a century's wages! The other was given two talents, forty years worth of wages, and the other one was given "only" one talent, which is two decades average wages.¹ It's not too hard to see what Jesus is getting at in this story. In Jesus' story, a talent is money. Lots of money, in fact. But the parable isn't just about how we use the money entrusted to our care by our Master, although it certainly includes that. The word "talent" has a double entendre in English; in fact, the etymology of the current usage of the word "talent" can be traced back to this parable of Jesus. A talent can stand for whatever gift, skill or riches God has invested in and entrusted to us.

Jesus says the first servant "... went at once and put his talents to work and gained five more." The same with the second servant; they each doubled their investments. The words are aggressive, active. They ... went out! They crossed the street! They risked. They worked. And they gained. The words portray two industrious, conscientious servants who jumped on opportunities given them by the Master's investment with zest and commitment. This critical period between the Master's leaving and his return is a time to go to work with 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, He wants the unloved loved, He wants the shut-in visited, He wants children raised well, He wants the neighbor cared for. 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

¹ See <http://www.dubiousdisciple.com/2011/10/matthew-2525-how-much-is-a-talent.html>

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! Must stay safe! Gotta protect what I got! So, he took the money and put it in a hole. He did not put the "money vehicle" in *drive*; he put this veritable Porsche 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 it and wait until you're 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 there is just no way to live well and productively and avoid taking 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.

"*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 Master. They are enthusiastic; they are eager, even giddy, to see him and show how they've used his trust. "*Master, you entrusted me with these talents. See, I have gained more!*" These servants feel good, they are proud of their work, they've enjoyed their work, 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 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 **personal** sense of purpose and fulfillment and 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*. In a conversation with one of our members this past week (*Jay Swiatek*), he made the wry but astute observation that the only really safe place on earth, the only place will nothing can harm you, is in a casket. I agreed. The obvious problem is there is just no life in a casket. The Master condemns such "caution" for what it is ... it's laziness at best, and at worst ... it's selfishly wicked. After all, you've deprived the world around you as well as yourself from any potential blessing that might have been received by your Master's investment in you. 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 and hiding 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 to him twenty years' wages. What he does with the money with which he has been entrusted displays he doesn't really know and understand the Master at all! The Master wants to share His happiness, the Master wants His servants to experience the exhilaration and joy of investing their God-given talents for the betterment of 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 or understand God at all, expressing itself in unwillingness to take risks and put to work what the Master has given. That unhealthy, morbid fear 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! There is much we can do in what we might think are limited means and circumstances! 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.

God (*and the 82nd Airborne!*) delights 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.