

A Holy Risk
Matthew 25:14-30
November 16, 2008

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.

The one who had received five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents.

In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents.

But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who has received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "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."

And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, "Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents." His master said to him, "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."

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours. But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was mine with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

You may know that I am in a preaching group with about 14 other pastors. We meet once a year for a week; each of us take two Sundays in the liturgical calendar and present a paper on a text of our choosing. Chances are, if you are particularly impressed with my biblical acumen in a sermon you will want to check my footnotes. The Portable Snack (as we are known) is fabulous group of preachers; folks whom I admire and upon whom I depend.

When we met last spring, the group heard a series of papers on this section of Matthew's gospel. In this section there is a sense of urgency in Jesus' teaching as his arrest and crucifixion draw near. This series of parables is also a prelude to Advent. In our discussion of these parables it became hard for us to ignore the prevalence of teeth that gnash and outer darkness that threatens. Indeed, we created a short-hand phrase, "the place with the teeth," to aid our conversation.

"The place with the teeth" figures prominently in today's passage. It is a bit disconcerting. "As for this worthless slave, throw him into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." The word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!

Lest we forget, this is the ***gospel*** according to Matthew. The good news about Jesus Christ – the incarnate Word of God, our Lord and Savior. And yet at the end of this parable there doesn't seem to be a lot of good news. Indeed, the talent of the man who is banished to the place with the teeth is given to the man who has ten talents. So what is going on here?

Looking back gives us a clue. This is a parable about God's generosity – not about God's judgment. The master comes and entrusts all of his property to his servants. Upon his return, the master is pleased with what he describes as trustworthiness with the first and second servant. The third servant is different. There is not a sense of trust on the servant's part – instead there is an admission of fear. "I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed; and so I was afraid..."

As a commentator has said, "in theological terms, the third servant gets the peevish tyrant god he believes in. The story is not about the

generous master suddenly turning cruel and punitive; it is about living with the consequences of one's own faith.”¹ It is about living in fear or living with trust.

It's remarkable, isn't it, how easy it is to filter God's generosity through the lens of our misperceptions. It is also instructive; for how often have our expectations for God – which are informed by our own hurts, our own anxieties, our own fears – defined our experience of God? There is a lot of us in that third servant: we often get the god we believe in.

* * *

The third servant missed seeing the remarkable generosity of God because he was afraid. His view was limited by a crushing sense of responsibility to play it safe. I don't blame him for burying the talent. Indeed, within rabbinic commentary about the time in which Jesus lived, burying a treasure was a prudent strategy. It was a normal practice for the day and age; one that was accepted and tested.

Who knows exactly why he felt the need to play it safe. Maybe he had some knowledge of the market that the other two servants didn't have. Perhaps he had a past history of an investment that went badly and caused him pain. Who knows why he felt the need to play it safe, but clearly there was skepticism on his part. Skepticism toward the master who granted him the talent and toward himself and his ability to manage such a responsibility.

No, I don't blame the third servant for burying his talent, especially reading this parable today. We are in a time of great skepticism when it comes to investments. A swirl of anxiety made manifest by an economy that is uncertain and that is befuddling even the best attempts to comprehend it. This year, perhaps more than any other, our sympathy goes out to this third servant because we understand his reason for prudence; his reason to play it safe.

Reading this parable in wake of economic collapse that can fairly be blamed on a lack of prudence, greed run amuck, and risky investment strategies – the reaction of the master toward this third servant

¹ Long, Tom (*Matthew*, Westminster/John Knox, 1997) p. 282.

becomes even more troubling because we get it; we can imagine his reasons to bury that talent in the ground and avoid the risk.

Hearing about those first two servants making 100% on their investment reminds us of the early nineties – when 401K's grew exponentially and sugar-plum fairies danced through the air. Today we see the reason to be skeptical. We value risk-management and are comfortable hedging our commitments by not investing too much of ourselves in one place.

* * *

We hear this parable differently today. We are quick to pick up the language of economics. Somewhere in the back of our minds, perhaps from the fading memory of Sunday school lesson, we remember that a talent is the equivalent of 15 years of a usual daily wage.

We hear this parable today – on Commitment Sunday – in the midst of sermons and minutes for mission on stewardship and talk of next year's annual budget and we can't help but think about money.

So here's the thing: while this is a parable about stewardship it is not a parable about money. Again in the words of a commentator, "There is, of course, nothing wrong with the idea that we should use our [money or our] talents to glorify God, but that idea alone is much too tame for this parable. The parable is not a gentle tale about what Christians do with their individual gifts or talents, as helpful as that may be, but a disturbing story about what Christians do or do not do with the gospel as they wait for the Kingdom of Heaven."²

* * *

This is a parable about stewardship, and at issue is our stewardship of the gospel; the good news of Jesus Christ that has been entrusted to our care. How do we live it? How do we share it? How do we invest ourselves in it? How we answer these questions sheds light on how much we value the good news – and more than that – how much we trust it.

² Long, p. 281.

In the parable, it was trustworthiness that so impressed the master. The servants trusted the gift that they had been given so much that there was no doubt it would yield positive growth. Their absolute trust their master and the gift that he gave precluded any skepticism they may have had. In other words – they trusted the good news to be good.

In a world full of anxieties and contradictions – trusting the good news to be good can be difficult. In our lives that often bring us face to face with pain and questions of “why” – trusting the good news to be good can seem like a lot to ask. How can we trust the good news – that through Jesus Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself and will bring a new heaven a new earth – how can we trust that when this present reality seems to suggest otherwise?

In 1983, when the last vestige of apartheid still held a firm grip on the country of South Africa, there was a gathering of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, Canada. Desmond Tutu, now the Archbishop of Cape Town, had been invited to speak to the assembly. The government of South Africa at first prohibited him from leaving the country. After some political pressure, they granted Bishop Tutu a 36 hour visa.

Arriving in the middle of the night – and needing to turn right back around to South Africa before his visa expired – Tutu was welcomed by thousands who has waited up to hear him speak. As the crowd watched, Tutu stepped up to the microphone. Here was a man who had been called to proclaim the gospel – a good news gospel of liberation and equality and reconciliation – in a country where his people were abused, detained, and utterly oppressed. Tutu stood before the crowds in the middle of the night and said:

“When I look out at you, and think about the problems that face our world, I thank God that I am not God. But when I look out at you, and see the face of my brothers and sisters in Christ from around the world, I thank God that God is God.”

* * *

In Matthew, Jesus does a lot of talking about the kingdom of heaven – or the kingdom of God. Often, this kingdom of God is set in direct contrast to the kingdom of this world: the kingdom of the here and now.

In Matthew, many of Jesus' parables ask us to choose what kingdom will claim our allegiance. Where does our trust lie? In the kingdom of heaven – that kingdom that we glimpse through the gospel promises of God but one that we do not yet fully see? Or does our trust lie in the kingdom of this world – that kingdom whose promises are not eternal, but whose rules are familiar to us? Jesus asks us to choose.

We have been given a gift – the gift of the gospel – the good news of Jesus Christ that points beyond the unfulfilled promises of this world in toward a future that is secure in the providential hand of the Lord our God. We have been given a gift, the gift of the gospel, and God asks that we are stewards of that gift until he returns to make all things new.

How do we live that gospel? How do we share it? How do we invest ourselves in it?

God has entrusted us with a message that needs to be shared. That this world is still be created; that God is not finished with us yet; that through the grace of Jesus Christ all will be redeemed; that in God's future all will be well.

Just because we don't see that as clearly as we wish is not an excuse to play it safe. It is not an excuse to hedge our bets and spread our loyalty thin in the hopes that we might cut our losses.

We have been called to be stewards of the gospel; to trust that the good news is good.

May we give ourselves over completely to that task; even with a sense of holy risk. Trusting and knowing that – though this world may seem otherwise – God's kingdom is breaking in. Even here, even now.

All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.