

## Working For the Lord (Matthew 25:14-30)

Most of us are familiar with the parable Jesus told in our gospel lesson for today. It's the story about the generous man who entrusted his property to his slaves. He had great faith in his slaves, entrusting to them his property without any oversight, supervision, or instructions. He gave them complete freedom to do what they would with his property while he was gone.

He gave one slave five talents; another, two; and another, one. And we're not talking about talents as we think of talents—as abilities or skills. Some people describe the biblical talents as coins. But, according to New Testament Scholar William Barclay, "The talent was not a coin, it was a weight; and therefore its value obviously depended on whether the metal involved was copper, gold, or silver. The commonest metal involved was silver."<sup>1</sup> A talent was worth a very large amount of money—something like the amount a laborer would receive for 15 years of hard work. Yes, the master was extremely generous and trusting, even with the slave to whom he gave only one talent.

But the story is not only about the generous, trusting master. It's also about his slaves and what they did with the trust, the responsibility, the freedom, and the resources entrusted to them by their master. Two of the three slaves took what they received and used it, so that it was doubled when the master returned. The other slave, however, did not use what was given to him. Instead, he dug a hole and put the talent given him in the ground, so that when the master returned, all he had to do was dig it back up and return it to the master.

And surely here is where we begin to look for the message of the parable. For the master was extremely pleased with the first two slaves and extremely displeased with the third slave. To the first two slaves, he said, "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 to the third slave, the master said, "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 my own with interest....As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Harsh punishment! But what was the difference between the first two slaves and the third? After all, the third slave did not steal from the master. He returned that which he had been given. And so, what exactly was his crime? To be thrown into the outer

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William, The Gospel According to Matthew, Volume 2

darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth—it must have been something really bad. But what exactly was it? For what was he condemned?

There have been all sorts of sermons written putting forth possibilities. But today let's just focus on the hints that Jesus himself gave us in the story. There's one hint in something that the third slave himself said. He said that he hid the talent because he was afraid of what might happen and what the repercussions might be. The third servant tried to defend himself by 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."

Then there are other hints in something that the master said. The master called the third slave wicked and lazy. Now, we understand lazy. And so it's clear that the master was upset with the third slave because he didn't do any work for him. He just buried what he had been given in the ground. He was too lazy to work for his master. But why did the master call him wicked? Well, it could be that he was wicked because he was lazy. Imagine all the thinking, planning, watching, work that the first two slaves must have done to double the master's property? But, after burying what had been entrusted to him, the third slave probably just went home and did what he wanted, pleased himself. enjoyed himself until the master returned. So, a case could be made for calling the laziness wickedness, for in being lazy, the slave was cheating the master—cheating him out of the work that he should have been doing for him.

But perhaps in calling the slave wicked, the master was referring to the fear that the slave himself had admitted to. He was wicked in other words because he allowed his fear to prevent him from doing all that he could have with what had been entrusted to him. He was afraid to use or to take risks with what had been given to him.

The parable does indeed seem to encourage risk taking. The master was very pleased that the first two slaves had somehow used what they had been given to increase his holdings. No doubt, however, however they had used the talents had been risky. And this isn't the only place that the Bible encourages risk-taking. As Preacher Edward Bowen once put it, "God invites us to take the risk of being faithful, even when that doesn't seem to be a very safe thing to do. It makes me think of the story in the Old Testament, when the Hebrews had made it most of the way across the desert toward the Promised Land. Moses decided to send out some spies to go ahead and see what the land was like. And the spies discovered that the land was wonderful, that it was a land flowing with milk and honey. But they also saw that that land was occupied by other people. And so they became afraid. And so those spies came back and said: 'The land that we are headed to is awful. It's barren and we're sure to die there. So let's do the

safe thing and go back to Egypt.”<sup>2</sup> And remember how Jesus told the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give it all to the poor? And how about that reckless widow Jesus praised—the one who gave all she had to God? And how risky it was for the 12 Jesus called to leave their families and businesses to follow him—to stake all on an unknown itinerant rabbi?

Yes, it certainly seems, as Preacher Brett Blair put it, “Jesus doesn’t want his disciples to hunker down and keep their heads low. Disciples aren’t called to avoid risk, high stakes, and genuine challenges. A disciple of Jesus operates within the world of high risk. Jesus placed himself in the firing line of history. Sometimes he calls us to place ourselves in the firing line of history as well.”<sup>3</sup>

At the age of 12, a Macedonian girl named Agnes felt the spirit of God calling her to take a risk. She left home at age 18, never again to see her mother or sister, to join the Sisters of Loreto as a missionary. She went to Ireland to learn English, and then she traveled to India, where she became a nun and chose the name Teresa. Working as a teacher at a convent school in Calcutta, she was happy, but she became increasingly disturbed by the poverty in the city. A famine in 1943 brought even more misery and death to the city; and the outbreak of Hindu/Muslim violence in August 1946 plunged the city into more despair and horror. Shortly after this, on September 10, 1946, Teresa experienced what she later described as “the call within the call” while traveling to the Loreto convent in Darjeeling for her annual retreat. She said, “I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them. It was an order. To fail would have been to break the faith.” So she decided to “place herself in the firing line of history.” She began her missionary work with the poor in 1948. After starting a school, she began tending to the needs of the destitute and starving. Teresa wrote in her diary that her first year was fraught with difficulties. She had no income and had to resort to begging for food and supplies. She knew what risky business she was involved in. She experienced doubt, loneliness and the temptation to return to the comfort of convent life during these early months.<sup>4</sup>

When a newsman by the name of Malcolm Muggeridge went to Calcutta to do a special documentary on Mother Teresa for BBC-TV in 1970, he met her as she was working out in the streets with sick and poor people in a ghetto like he had never seen before, amid stench, filth, garbage, disease, and poverty that was just unbelievable. How could the little frail woman take such risks? But what struck Muggeridge more than anything

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<sup>2</sup> Bowen, Dr. Edward, “Risky Business”

<sup>3</sup> Blair, Brett, “The Parable Of The Talents”

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia, “Mother Teresa”

else, even there in that awful squalor and decadence, was the deep, warm glow on Mother Teresa's face and the deep, warm love in her eyes.

"Do you do this every day?" he began his interview. "Oh, yes," she replied. "It is my mission. It is how I serve and love my Lord." "You've been working here in these streets for eighteen years?" "Yes," she said simply, and yet joyfully. "It is my privilege to be here. These are my people. These are the ones my Lord has given me to love." "Do you ever get tired? Do you ever feel like quitting and letting someone else take over your ministry? After all, you are beginning to get older." The newsman was pointing out how risky it was for Mother Teresa to keep living on the streets, tending the sick, the dying. "Oh, no," she replied, "This is where the Lord wants me, and this is where I am happy to be. I feel young when I am here. The Lord is so good to me. How privileged I am to serve him."

Later, Malcolm Muggeridge said, "I will never forget that little lady as long as I live. The face, the glow, the eyes, the love? It was all so pure and so beautiful. I shall never forget it. It was like being in the presence of an angel. It changed my life. I have not been the same person since. It is more than I can describe."<sup>5</sup>

Mother Teresa took what was entrusted to her and risked her life using it, working for the Lord. She was given one talent, and each of us is given another talent. But we all can follow her example and the message of our Lord in today's gospel of taking what we have been given, and fearlessly, recklessly, bravely using it in working for the Lord.

God has given each one of us treasure, with trust in us, and hope for us. Today's gospel calls us to reflect on whether or not we are using the time, the talents, the money he has entrusted to us in working for him...or, if we are just playing it safe with them. Let us remember that working for God is meant to be risky business--but the risks that come with working for God have their rewards. As Hayden McLean put it, "The way to prepare ourselves for the future is to tackle it head-on, to take the risk and stake it all on the future. Only those willing who take the risk will be ready for the future on the day it arrives."

-- Terry Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 16, 2008

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<sup>5</sup> [www.sermonplus.co.uk](http://www.sermonplus.co.uk)