Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 25: 14-30

God of justice, help us to have the courage to follow even when it's risky. Hep us use the talents we've been given for the sake of your kingdom. Guide us as we follow your lead to build communities of peace, equality and justice for all. Amen

"What Are You Doing With Your Talent?"

Frederick Buechner was once asked why he thought Jesus spoke in parables. He replied, "I suspect that Jesus spoke many of his parables as a kind of sad and holy joke . . .and that may be part of why he seemed reluctant to explain them . . .because if you have to explain a joke, you might as well save your breath." *(Life Under the Blue Sky; The View From Below)*

This may be true, but I sure wish Jesus would have explained this parable about the 3 servants and talents, because it doesn't make any sense to me.

I've quoted him before but I think he's worth quoting again in this situation, that John Dominic Crossan always said you could tell a parable was a parable by your reaction to it; you're not sure what Jesus meant by it but you're sure you don't like it.

This parable is judgmental. It rubs me the wrong way. It doesn't at all square with what we believe about God or Jesus. God as a wealthy banker who punishes his prudent investor? I don't think so.

Which got me to thinking, maybe this parable isn't about money. Maybe it's about something else. Maybe Jesus is trying to tell us something about how we're supposed to live and follow him. After all, he's running out of time so his messages are becoming more and more urgent. When we meet up with him today, he's already entered Jerusalem, the crowds have already waved their palm branches at him, and the religious leaders and government authorities are already plotting how they're going to kill him.

Jesus knows this, and knows he only has so much time left to drill his message into the disciples' heads. So when he has them assembled, as he does in today's parable, he lets them know that he's serious about this kingdom building enterprise.

The parable he tells them is about a wealthy man who goes on a very long journey. Before the man leaves, he distributes his wealth to his servants. It's a lot of money. Some people estimate a talent was the equivalent of 20 years worth of paychecks. That's a lot of money. To the first servant he gives five talents-100 years worth of wages! To the second he gives 2 talents, or 40 years worth of wages, and to the third he gives 1 talent, or 20 years worth of wages. The master trusts the servants to handle his money properly. Obviously, he doesn't want to come home and find that his money has been lost or wasted away. For all we know, those 8 talents are his entire life savings.

Now, when the master arrives home he asks the servants about his money. The first servant says he's doubled the master's money. Wonderful, the master says. I will now trust you with many things.

The second servant has also doubled his money. Great, says the master, you too can be trusted with many things. Enter into the joy of your master.

But then comes the third servant. This servant was trusted with 1 talent and rather than risking it, he decided to bury it. Which, by the way, was not unusual in Jesus' day. Rabbinic law stipulated that burying money was the best safeguard against theft. And when a person buried money that was entrusted to him or her, he or she was no longer liable for what happened to it.

Based on that, it sounds to me like the third servant was both faithful to his religious laws and a prudent investor. He acted with caution so he wouldn't lose what was entrusted to him.

Yet, the master turns on the servant, gives his one talent to the servant who has 10, and tells him he'll be thrown into the outer darkness, which is a nice way of saying he's going to hell. For his work he is treated as harshly

as anyone in the Bible. *(Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Pastoral Perspective, John Buchanan)*

I, for one, am very sympathetic towards the servant. He was, after all, just doing what he thought was prudent. He was careful and cautious.

But perhaps that is the point of the parable. He was too careful and too cautious. Perhaps the point here is not about doubling one's money and accumulating wealth but is instead about living. Maybe it's about investing our lives in God's kingdom. Maybe it's about taking risks so that God's kingdom will come, and that God's will, will be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

We are, after all, hearing this parable in the last days of Jesus' life. Jesus took a risk when he entered Jerusalem. So maybe what Jesus is trying to tell his disciples is that being a follower of his will entail risk-taking.

Now I realize that this is not how we normally think of discipleship. Being a follower of Christ is not what we think of as a high-risk investment. But maybe that's the problem. Maybe faith isn't so much about our personal comfort level as it is about being faithful to Christ 24/7 and that's not always a comfortable thing to do.

I think what this parable teaches us is that the greatest risk is to risk nothing; the greatest risk is not to care 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, and to live cautiously and prudently.

We don't normally think that one of the greatest sins we can commit is to do nothing at all. We normally think of sin as something wrong we do; it turns out, though, that one of the biggest sins is to do nothing. The ancient church called this sin sloth, and it was one of the 7 biggies. Sloth means not caring, not loving, not rejoicing, not living up to the full potential of our humanity. Sloth means playing it safe, investing nothing, being cautious and prudent, and digging a hole and burying the money in the ground.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that the sin of respectable people is running away from responsibility. The third servant is thrown into outer darkness because he ran from his responsibility. He neglected to bring the valuable talent out into public, thereby missing an opportunity to further Jesus' work in the world. He took for granted the talent he was given.

Friends, all of us here have talents—absurdly valuable talents!—and with those talents come responsibilities:

- The responsibility for a church to use its influence in the world for the betterment of others.
- The responsibility—not to amass more for ourselves but to be engaged for the well-being of others.
- The responsibility to change lives.

And that brings me to stewardship, but not the financial kind.

We've just about brought our annual stewardship campaign to a close, and what a wonderful campaign it has been. I am so grateful for the generosity, the enthusiasm, and the commitment so many of you have demonstrated. Thank you. Truly.

But stewardship is about more than what we put in an offering envelope or pledge to give to the church. It's also about the stewardship of our time, our energy, our abilities, and our willingness to show up when there's work to be done.

And there's work to be done.

Our Missions Committee is looking for people willing to help organize meals for Josephine's Place. And our commitment to the Rescue Mission is growing. In fact, we're doubling the amount of food we provide because the need is so great. There are opportunities right here in our community to make a difference in the lives of people who need a little help, a little compassion, and a reminder that somebody cares.

And then there's our solar project. Today, at the conclusion of worship, we'll gather outside to dedicate the solar panels that have been installed on the church roof. This project has been years in the making. There have been meetings, planning, fundraising, decisions, and more than a few obstacles along the way. It would have been easy to decide it was too complicated, too expensive, too much trouble. It would have been easy to bury that particular talent and move on to something else.

But people didn't give up. They kept at it. They believed in the possibility of doing something good for the future of this congregation, for our community, and for God's creation. And today, we're going to celebrate that.

That's what stewardship looks like. It's taking what has been entrusted to us and putting it to work, rather than burying it or keeping it to ourselves.

In the story, two servants seize the opportunity to be responsible. One refuses. In burying the talent, the third servant refuses not simply to follow instructions, but to participate in furthering God's intentions for the world.

The parable is so severe because the stakes are so high. It denounces a Christianity that refuses its calling to embody good news and to stand against lies, oppression, and injustice. Matthew reminds us that what we do—or fail to do—has consequences. Our actions, and our inaction, shape our world and the lives of others.

As followers of Christ, much has been entrusted to us: our financial resources, our gifts and abilities, and our capacity to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are entrusted with the responsibility to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. We are called to protect the weak and vulnerable, to seek justice, and to speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves. Not just when it's convenient or easy, but every day.

Jesus invites us to live fully by investing our lives, taking risks, and expanding our sense of responsibility. Being his follower means acting

boldly, reaching higher, and caring deeply. It means dropping the shovels we're carrying and embracing the high-risk venture of being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Sources:
Rev. Dr. Matt Skinner, “Easter Imperatives: Advocate”, May 17, 2020