

Theme: Don't Bury Your Talents – Risk Using Them

For three Sundays in a row we have gospel passages selected from Matthew, chapter 25. All of chapter 25 deals with the “end times” and the return of Christ. Last Sunday we heard the “Parable of the Ten Bridesmaids” who are waiting for the bridegroom to bring his bride back to his own home. Each of these bridesmaids are responsible for providing and managing **their own** oil for their lamps, which will lead the bridal procession into the bridegroom’s home. Five of the maids are wise and take care to be prepared for any eventualities, like the bridegroom being delayed. Five are not so wise and run out of oil so that by the time they have purchased more, the bridegroom has arrived and has entered his home; the door to the bridegroom’s home is already closed and the maids are shut out. The point of this parable seems to be that we do not know when the Lord will return but we need to stay prepared so that when he comes the “oil in our lamps” is still brightly burning.

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells yet another parable: “The Parable of the Talents.” And next Sunday, as we come to the last Sunday of this year’s church calendar, we will hear a third passage from Matthew, chapter 25, when Jesus returns at the close of the age to judge the earth, separating the “sheep from the goats.” But for today, we look at this 2nd passage about the end times: “The Parable of the Talents.”

In this parable a man is about to go on a journey so he distributes to his three servants varying amounts of money, giving one five talents, to another two talents, and to a third just one talent. I used to think that the person who received only the one talent was really being short-changed and being treated rather poorly. At least that’s what I thought until I learned a little more about biblical monetary values. It’s hard to equate the value of one talent to modern day money exchanges, and different biblical commentators have varying opinions about how much money one talent actually amounted to. However, all commentators agree that a talent was the **largest** monetary unit in Jesus’ day. One commentator describes it as equivalent to the wages earned by an ordinary day laborer working for 15 years; another the wages of an ordinary worker for 20 years. If we use just the 15 years’ wages as the standard and then translate that into something we can understand today, it comes to a lot of money! At \$10.00/hour for 40 hours/week/year for 15 years, one talent equals about \$312,000. So even the servant who receives just one talent has been entrusted with a significant amount of money and responsibility. Quite frankly, I think I’d be quite happy if someone decided to give me over \$300,000! What about you?

Using the same exchange rate, the man receiving two talents would have received around \$624,000 and the man who received 5 talents around \$1.5 million. Though we can’t know for sure exactly how much each received, one thing is clear: **each one of them received a large amount**, even the person receiving just the one talent. The parable tells us that the master confers these differing gifts wisely; no servant is given more than he is capable of handling. And as the master departs, he doesn’t tell the servants what to do with the money – that determination is left to each person’s initiative.

Matthew tells us that “*The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents*” (Matthew 25:18). Likewise, the servant given two talents

doubles his holdings. But the third servant who had received the \$300,000 plus . . . He goes off, digs a hole in the ground and hides his master's money (vs.18).

According to the letter of the law, this third servant actually acted quite responsibly. The Jewish law of the day prescribed that if someone buried property entrusted to him, he was no longer liable if anything happened to it because he had taken the safest course possible. Remember, in biblical times there were no such things as FDIC insured accounts, guaranteed return rates, or safety deposit boxes. This guy has taken the safest, no risk route, with the master's money. And so when the master returns, this servant returns exactly the same amount of money that had been entrusted to him in the first place: no more but no less either. This servant explains his reason for burying the money by saying, "I was afraid." The master, however, is not happy with this servant's response; in fact, we could say he goes ballistic! The master has expected positive action on his behalf, not fearful and/or lazy inactivity.

There is a modern parable titled "Risking" by Patty Hansen that goes like this:

Two seeds lay side by side in the fertile spring soil.

The first seed said, "I want to grow! I want to send my roots deep into the soil beneath me, and thrust my sprouts through the earth's crust above me . . . I want to unfurl my tender buds like banners to announce the arrival of spring . . . I want to feel the warmth of the sun on my face and the blessing of the morning dew on my petals!"

And so she grew.

The second seed said, "I am afraid. If I send my roots into the ground below, I don't know what I will encounter in the dark. If I push my way through the hard soil above me, I may damage my delicate sprouts . . . what if I let my buds open and a snail tries to eat them? And if I were to open my blossoms, a small child may pull me from the ground. No, it is much better for me to wait until it is safe."

And so she waited.

A yard hen, scratching around in the early spring ground for food found the waiting seed and promptly ate it.¹

The moral of this story is that those who refuse to risk and grow get swallowed up by life. And that seems to be the point of Jesus' parable about the talents as well. We've all been given gifts from a gracious God. The question is not how much we've been given; the promise is that we have all received something. The real question is how are we using whatever gift God has entrusted to us? Unfortunately, as I related in the children's message, some of us are envious of other people's gifts and might even downplay our own gifts. Whether this is out of fear or an unwillingness to risk, this is a mistake.

I clearly remember one year asking a woman about teaching a Sunday School class. Her reaction was immediate. She said, "Oh, I could never teach older kids, but I suppose I could handle very

¹Hansen, Patty, "Risking," *Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 Stories to Open the Heart & Rekindle the Spirit*, written and compiled by Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 1993) 200-201.

young children, although I don't know that I would be very good at it." But she agreed to take on a class of two and three-year-olds. I remember walking in one day and was amazed to see eight of these young children sitting in a circle around this woman absolutely mesmerized by everything she was saying and doing. I thought to myself, "I can't do that; I can't mesmerize three-year-olds." This woman possessed an incredible gift she hadn't recognized in herself.

Likewise, I've seen some folks who could manage a kitchen and large group parish dinners so that everyone who was helping was happy, no one felt rushed, and the workers all sat down for a cup of coffee before anyone else arrived. I've also heard some of these folks say things like, "Oh, that's just kitchen work." Again, I've thought to myself: "Just kitchen work? Please don't ask me to do that because I would create chaos in the kitchen. I can preach a sermon, but managing large-scale dinners is outside my talent set."

It's actually quite amazing how often we downplay the very talents God has given to us and then envy other people's gifts. But, like the person with the one talent in the parable today, God expects us to invest whatever talent we have for the benefit of the master. And that requires risk and trust as well as a sense of one's own giftedness.

A congregation in Gary, Indiana tells the story of a strange woman who showed up in church one Sunday with her two small sons. After the service she asked to speak to the pastor. When he sat down with her, she explained that she had been staying in a battered women's shelter for several days, and had just decided to move south – away from her family, her friends, and her abusive husband. [I imagine that, at this point in her story, the pastor was waiting for her to request funds to help her make the trip.] But she then added that before she went, she wanted the church to pray for her, and she wanted to give a tithe to the church. She reached into her purse and pulled out \$30.56. Then she handed it to the pastor. The pastor, of course, protested and said she should keep the money for herself and her two sons. But she responded, "You don't understand. Even if I kept the ten percent, I wouldn't have enough money to provide for me and my sons. So I want to give it to God. I trust that God will give me a new life. To show him I trust him, I want to give my money."²

Will we risk like the woman? Or will we bury the talents we've been given? The basic message of Jesus' parable seems to be that growth in discipleship only comes to those disciples who are willing to take risks. Fear is what stops risk-taking. To quote one author: "*The desire to safeguard what God has given can inhibit growth. When the Lord returns, he does not want to hear his followers declare, 'Look everything is just as it was when you left!' Growth requires change, change involves risk, and risk requires trust.*"³

To conclude this morning, I want to show you three t-shirts that symbolize this gospel parable to me. The first is a t-shirt I received several decades ago. It reads: "**Jesus is Coming – Look Busy**" (*Hold up the t-shirt,*) I might have preferred this to read "**Jesus Is Coming – Get Busy** rather than "**Look Busy**," because I know that sometimes I indeed look like I'm busy when I'm really not. But in today's parable, the master is coming and expects to see productive work being accomplished with the gifts he has given to us.

²Source unknown.

³Mark Allen Powell, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol 13, No. 12 (November, 2002) 17.

The second t-shirt proclaims that we are to use our talents going about the work God has given us to do. This t-shirt is one you've all seen and one that many of you possess. It reads: "**God's Work. Our Hands.**" Our Lord indeed expects us to use our hands to get busy with God's work.

The third t-shirt comes from Thrivent for Lutherans and simply reads: "**Live Generously**" To me that means we should live our lives **generously**, investing and risking the talents with which God has bestowed upon us and not hiding and burying those talents in fear.

As with the children this morning, I exhort all of us to undertake a self-survey and ask ourselves: "What are the talents God has bestowed upon me? What do I really like to do and what are those abilities that seem to come easy to me." Then ask yourself: "How am I investing these talents for the sake of God's kingdom?"