

Matthew 25:14-30

“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 the 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 had 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 my own 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.’”

“Risk Takers”

“Love is something that if you give it away, give it away, give it away...love is something that if you give it away you’ll end up having more.” Do we really believe in the lyrics of this *Magic Penny* song that I learned long ago in Sunday school? Is this a sound way to live in the world today? It is definitely not practical to live out this philosophy! But the One who gives love away without assurance of a return appears to be a big risk taker in the biblical narrative. In our parable from Matthew today, the ones with whom the master is pleased, take big risks as well. They go out immediately and trade what the master has given them and double their talents.

Our parable is a complex and confusing story! The master himself is portrayed as both generous and harsh depending on the vantage point of the servant or hearer. How are we to understand a master who entrusted his land to his servants and gave the three of them eight talents split according to their abilities and then throws the cautious and calculating one-talent fearful man into the outer darkness? What happened to grace for the sinner? Jesus sat at table with all kinds of people and invited them to follow him knowing full well that they would fall short of perfect response to the grace God offered them. Why a different story now?

Matthew relates that Jesus’ disciples approached him with the following question a chapter before our parable. “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?” (Matthew 24:3b) Jesus had already told them he was to

be crucified. He just left Jerusalem in lament over the city and his disciples, seeking assurance, ask him for straight answers about his return after his death. They get some answers to their questions, but Jesus' sayings about his second coming quickly move to parables about the life of faithful discipleship in the in-between. Be ready. Blessed is the one at work. Be prepared with extra oil in case the bridegroom is delayed. And today we learn how to be "responsible" in our discipleship until the master comes back.

So is Jesus the harsh master as the man with one talent believed? The answer is no! Parables are told to shed light on a specific teaching or issue. The demanding owner is not Jesus any more than the unjust judge is in another parable. Jesus shares this parable to point to truths about our call as his disciples, our response to God's grace.

Unlike our modern usage of the word, a "talent" in the parable refers to a huge sum of money. Half of career wages for a day laborer. "In the Middle Ages 'talent' began to be used as a term for God-given abilities."¹ What the servants do with their talents illustrate faithful and unfaithful discipleship of Christ. What we do with the talent given to us is what matters to the teller of the parable.

The man with one talent was a fearful man. He feared losing what he believed belonged to the owner. He never viewed his one talent as belonging to him. The parable tells us he "went off and dug a hole and hid his master's money." The other two believed the talents were given to them. They did not hesitate to go out and doubled their money in high risk ventures by trading their talents! These slaves know the master's character as well and are not worried about risking what was given to them. But the one-talent slave believes that he serves more safely with his talent in the ground.

The grace of Jesus Christ, love given away, is meant to empower believers to live as Jesus did. The man who buried his talent never really took up this gift as his own. He felt his master's money was to be protected. This is not the good news. No wonder he buried that god's talent. When disciples believe in a god of fear and consequences we are bound with no room to freely respond to our triune God of love. Jesus guides us to take risks of faith because we have received the good news and have nothing to fear.

When we respond to grace we are free to risk what seemed before to be impossible to follow God. The youth ministries team at the church I served in Indiana took a huge leap of faith three years ago. They have an amazing youth director who was well aware of recent studies on youth ministry. Youth who attend youth group or Sunday school, but never go to worship services have a very low percentage of retaining a church connection during college. Probably 95% of the youth who attended Sunday school or youth group did not attend worship. With the support of the staff and numerous planned parent/youth meetings the youth department cancelled middle school and high school Sunday school for a year. They hoped the parents would bring their youth to worship services or would drop them off to sit with the youth leaders. Generally speaking their endeavor crashed and burned. Most parents and youth voted with their feet by not showing up at all in the mornings. But a few families started attending worship together for the first time ever and carried on during the next year. Even though Sunday school was reinstated the following

year during the 9 a.m. worship service and most of the church's youth still never attend regular services, not one of the youth leaders regretted having followed their faith. They modeled a more excellent way to nurture youth of their congregation. They felt called to risk the backlash they knew would come in response to their decision.

Matthew's parable is couched in the language of eschatological reward and punishment. We are left to suppose that these two happen when Christ returns. But perhaps we punish ourselves when we do not take risks of faith. We miss receiving the benefits of the struggle, Christ's presence in the hard times, and the dialogue with others who have different theological, biblical and ethical views.

This is what the "more" of the song I learned as a child is referencing. If you give love away, which requires taking discipleship risks, the song says you'll end up having more. Love leads us to be risk takers in regards to faith. The risk takers in the parable of the talents receive "more" as well. More means more responsibility as disciples and also a deeper knowledge of the joy of God's presence with us.

This is not news to you! We are already disciples of Christ. We know that faith means taking risks. The only risk that is wrong in regards to faith is to sit on our hands and do nothing in response to God's grace, to bury our talents and claim we buried them because we are fearful of how God will perceive our endeavors. We know that sitting on our hands is not the life of faith. But sometimes we all need a little shaking up! We need this parable. We've established routines and gotten stuck in bad patterns—both corporately and individually. God says, keep on moving, you are my partner and I am the dynamic living God who fills you with the Spirit.

We are free, cherished and loved in abundance! Like the Father in the story of the prodigal son when speaking to the older brother at the end, Jesus is saying "All I have is yours." Remember that and live unbounded, come and celebrate, follow me by taking risks for the sake of Love. We all have been given talents according to our measure. The Spirit makes these abilities a faith responsibility according to which we will be held accountable. While we know and proclaim our accountability we also proclaim that Jesus conquered death and sin and he will return as our just judge. What is left to fear in a life of discipleship regarding God? So go follow our Savior and take some risks in response to the grace you've been given. And don't forget to challenge me to take some too. Amen.

¹ M. Eugene Boring "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections" in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1995) 453.