

Risking For God

Matthew 25:14-30

November 23, 2008

Let's hear a summary of the story one more time: a well-off person was going away for a period of time. He gave three of his employees a portion of his money. The word used in the story is *talents*. In Jesus' time it was understood that it was meant to describe a specific weight of silver or gold. Each talent would have been worth about \$1,000 in today's dollars. Thus, in Jesus' day it represented a large sum of money. Our modern use of the word to refer to someone's skill or ability originated with this parable.

One servant received five talents, another two talents and a third, one talent – each proportionate to the master's sense of their ability to handle such responsibility. The first and second servants invested their talents wisely and the master's portfolio doubled in value.

The third guy buried what the master had entrusted to him. He picked up a shovel, dug a hole, put the money in the hole and threw earth on top of it. The equivalent in our day would be someone stuffing money in a mattress. What the servant did though, was actually what was expected of him in that day. No one listening to Jesus tell the story would have been surprised when Jesus told that portion of the story. The Rabbinic law was that if a slave took money entrusted to him and buried it in the ground he was in the clear because he had protected what he'd been given. Playing it safe was expected of servants. What got the attention of the listeners – what caused them to sit up and take notice - was Jesus' comment about the reaction of the master to the responsible behavior of the third servant.

Biblical scholars are pretty sure this isn't a Jesus' original. Jesus had a tendency to take well-known stories – the stories of the people – and adapt them to his use. It was when he told the familiar stories and changed something in them in such a way as to say “there's something different about the way I see things and the way you've seen or understood things – there's something different here between the way the established religious leaders have interpreted God's activity in the world and the way I see it.”

This story is another one about stewardship – how we are to use what God gives us – what God entrusts to us – who God has created us to be. It's not about how much we have but about how we put what we have to use. The man who buried the one talent was not condemned because he only had one talent but because he did not use it. The first two servants weren't praised because of how much they had but that they did something with what they were given – they took some chances, took some risks and made what they were given more valuable than when they received it. The point is: we are accountable for how we use what we have been given and who we are. It's not about how rich we are or how talented we are, but rather it's about how creative we are with what we have been given – whether we have been willing to take the chances necessary to further God's kingdom with what we have and who we are.

In Carl Carlozzi's Pocket Parables we read this contemporary rephrasing of the story: “For the kingdom of heaven will be as when a private foundation made grants of seed money to three charitable agencies in the inner city. One agency received \$35,000, another \$20,000, and another \$10,000. The directors of the first agency took their grant of \$35,000 and set up a pilot program to aid youngsters suffering from child abuse. The directors of the second agency took their grant of \$20,000 and funded a program to assist the housebound elderly. But the directors of the third agency took their grant of \$10,000 and put the funds into a saving account.

“Now nine months later when the board of the private foundation was considering grants for the forthcoming year, they called in a representative of each of the recipient agencies to inquire as to the manner in which each had used the seed money. When the representative of the first agency had made his report, the president of the foundation replied, ‘You have done well; count on another grant from us next year.’

“When the representative of the second agency had made his report, the president of the foundation said, ‘You, too, have done a creditable job; count on another grant from us in the coming year.’

“But when the representative of the third agency had made his report, the president of the foundation said, ‘What kind of initiative and vision is that?’

“And the agency’s representative replied, ‘We knew your foundation’s reputation for being very demanding of its grant recipients and we did not wish to incur your disfavor by entering into an untested venture.’

“To which the president of the foundation replied, ‘If you knew that we were willing to have vision enough to take risks with our funds, you should have done the same yourself. Those who hoard their treasure, because of the risk of loss, do nothing to liberate potential or to advance the common good. Do not ever expect to receive another grant from this foundation. Show this man to the door and let him lament his agency’s financial plight and struggle to find funds elsewhere.’”¹

Steven Jobs was the founder of Apple Computer. At one point during the startup phase Jobs decided that the man he believed could really help him fulfill his dream was John Sculley. The problem was Sculley was very comfortable and safely entrenched as president of Pepsico. He already had power, prestige, public recognition, an enormous salary and a secure future. He wasn’t too interested in a career change that would require a move to the West Coast. He was concerned that he might lose some of the pension and deferred compensation he’d built up with Pepsico. He once said later about his attitude early in the courting period by Jobs, “I was overly concerned with what would happen next week and the week after next.”

Steven Jobs sensed that Sculley had grown to dislike the competitive nature of the soft drink business and that he was bored. He finally confronted him with a pointed question: “John, do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water or do you want a chance to change the world?” As a result of Jobs continuing to challenge Sculley, he left Pepsico and went to Apple and helped it grow into one of the most successful corporations in the world. John Sculley’s life was changed because he took the risk and decided to invest in himself and others, and to grow.²

The point of the biblical story isn’t that our role as Christians is to make as much money as we can. This isn’t just a story about being good shrewd business people and thus making a lot of money. Jesus was talking here, had in mind here, such things also as faith, love, charity, kindness, abilities, life, and work. God expects us to take risks with all of those aspects of our lives. God expects us to use what we have been given – not hoard it, protect it, or cling to it. God expects us to invest our lives in the world. The primary purpose of this text is to remind us that God is generous to us and that we are going to be held accountable for what we do with what our generous God entrusts to us.

Today’s Gospel is a parable of our reality. We have been entrusted with a portion of what is God’s. We are each one benefactors, stewards, of great grants from God. We are invited to make good use of what God has given us – the opportunities, resources, skills, abilities, interests that make us the unique individuals we are.

There was a church member in a Boston church who said to himself, “I cannot speak in prayer meetings. I cannot do many other things in Christian service. But I can put two extra plates on my dinner table every Sunday and invite two young people who are away from home to eat with me.” He did that for many years. He led many to Christ as a result of spending time with them on Sunday evenings.

When he died, his funeral and burial was in another city. Because he was a well-known Christian, a special bus was chartered to transport people there. It was announced that any person who had become a Christian through his influence was welcome to go along. Because over 150 persons showed up to honor the man who had preached the Gospel by means of two extra dinner plates on his table each Sunday night additional buses had to be rented.

There was a young girl in Pennsylvania a few years ago who heard that there was only one survivor of a deadly jet crash near Detroit. This little girl wanted to help but all she knew how to do was bake chocolate chip cookies. So, she set up a stand by her house and sold chocolate chip cookies for 5 cents a cookie. One child with one talent and with a heart desiring to be a servant raised over \$400 at five cents a cookie.

The scripture passage notes that we dare not wait – neither the church nor us as individuals. God can do some pretty amazing things with both the big and the small things in our lives. The challenge of Jesus is that we put our prayers, presence, gifts and service where our mouths and our dreams are. Yes, it involves some risk taking, some challenges, but that is what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ’s.

Over the years I’ve considered offering congregations the opportunity to try a little experiment with this parable. Each year I’ve been so tempted, something has happened to cause me to not do it.

Several times in more recent years I’ve read articles in the newspaper or members of the congregation have sent me reports of how other congregations have tried to put into practice the principles in the parables. I decided two weeks ago that this was the year. Since I was sick last week we decided to put it off a week.

Perhaps you noticed when you entered the sanctuary this morning that there is a table in front of the chancel area covered with envelopes. Inside each envelope is a \$10 bill and a note with some ideas on it. I want to invite you this morning to come forward during the singing of the closing hymn and pick up one of the envelopes – one for everyone in the family, not one per household. The challenge over the next four weeks is to combine the \$10 in the envelope with your creativeness. We’re going to take up a special offering on the final Sunday of Advent, December 21st at the end of the service. We will be asked to bring forward the envelope with whatever we were able to do with the \$10 along with a brief note about the experience – about what you did.

It might be helpful to know that the source of the almost \$4,000 being used for this project, was not the operating savings or checking accounts. Some of our fellow members heard about the idea and agreed to provide the necessary funds for us to try this.

Now, let me say to you that if you choose not to give this a try, all you have to do is not take an envelope this morning. I also hope you don’t see this as simply another attempt at making some money for the church. Frankly, I’ve not even run by the finance committee or Administrative Council what we will do with what is turned in at the end of the project. After paying our investors back, perhaps the surplus will be given toward

some mission projects or used to help us pay all of our apportionments. The project is primarily about offering us the occasion to combine our skills, interests, and creativity for the furthering of God's kingdom – to take some risks with what God has given us so that we might be able to recognize what is possible when the generosity of God's gifts to us are invested by us.

Let me prime the pump for the venture ahead with a few illustrations of some things persons in a church in Chagrin Falls, Ohio did. Hal Maskiell is a 62-year old retired Navy pilot who loves to fly a four-seater Cessna 172 Skyhawk over the Cuyahoga County hills. He rented air time with his money and charged persons for half-hour rides.

His girlfriend, Kathy Marous, wasn't as confident of what she might do. Then she found an old family recipe for tomato soup. She bought some tomatoes and chopped and cooked and canned and offered the resulting jars of tomato soup after church one Sunday.

Barbara Gates had been for years casually making pendants for her grandchildren from beads and sea glass. She bought the material to make a few and sold them to church members.

Twelve-year-old Amanda pooled her money with some friends, stocked up at JoAnn's fabric store, and made dozens of colorful fleece baby blankets, which were purchased by church members and then donated to a local hospital.

Bob Burrows, 87 years old, rediscovered old carpentry skills and began selling wooden bird-feeders.

And then there was the person who sold rides on his Harley, the woman who knitted eight-inch stuffed dolls with button noses and floppy hats, and the woman who saw some flip-flops on sale at Old Navy, stocked up on some yarn and beads and made dozens of funky, fluffy decorative footwear.

There are more ideas in the envelopes. I can't wait to see and hear what the results will be.

Let us pray.

1. Carl Carlozzi, Pocket Parables (Wheaton, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1985), pp. 99-102.
2. John Sculley, Odyssey (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 90.