



“Take the Risk”
Matthew 25:14-30
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
November 13, 2011

“Once upon a time there was a princess...It was a dark and stormy night...A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far, away...” We lean forward and our ears perk up when we hear a story coming. Jesus was a master weaver of tales who often told stories to teach people about God and how God wants us to live. His stories were easily grasped and made powerful impacts on his list. His stories would lead to “Aha!” moments when people were struck by an insight and from that moment on, saw their lives from a new perspective.

It’s quite possible that in addition to telling compelling stories, Jesus may have preached some long, tedious sermons. At least that’s what most preachers would like to think. I know there have been times when I threw myself into a particular Scripture passage, read multiple commentaries, spent hours on the computer crafting what I – very modestly! – believed was a rather brilliant exposition of the text. Then, when I preached it with such eloquence I just knew people would be so inspired they would be stunned into silence.

Well, they were silent all right. Their eyes glazed over and they daydreamed about what they were going to do later that afternoon.

Most preachers have been there and so we harbor the secret hope that Jesus may have also laid an egg. If he did, it was soon forgotten. What was remembered and written down in the gospels were his stories. Not historically accurate stories upheld by *FactCheck.org*, but stories that paint pictures in our minds and point to a profound truth.

Some of the stories Jesus told were simple, some had multiple layers; some were comforting, others were jarring. Today’s parable falls into the latter category.

Jesus says, “It’s as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one servant, he gave five talents, to another servant two talents and to a third servant, he gave one talent; each according to his ability. Then, the master went away.

It’s obvious from the way the parable talks about talents that Jesus is talking about money. He says the first two servants traded with the talents and doubled them. The third servant dug a hole in the ground where he hid his master’s money.

The original audience of Jesus knew that a “talent” was an enormous sum of money. A talent was roughly equivalent to 20 years worth of wages. So, each servant is given something extremely valuable.

How would you handle an enormous chunk of money entrusted to you by your boss? Would you skip off to Atlantic City? Dial up a financial advisor? Would you put it in a lock box for safekeeping?

In his parable, Jesus says the first two servants wheel and deal and double what they have. These are profits on the scale of Wall Street's finest hedge fund managers! The third servant is cautious. He does not intend to lose a dime of his master's money so he hides it in a safe place. Had he been Westminster's financial adviser in the fall of 2008 when the bottom dropped out of the market and our endowment plummeted, we would have hailed him as a brilliant financial strategist for not putting any money at risk in the markets. But that's not what happens in this story.

The parable says that after a long absence, the master finally returns home and he calls together his three servants. The first has turned five talents into ten and the second has transformed two talents into four. The master is thrilled. "Great job!" he tells the first two. "You have proven yourself and from now on, you will be in charge of more."

The master, riding high on the success of the first two, turns to his third servant and says, "And how about you?"

The third servant mutters, "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. I hid your talent in the ground for safekeeping. Here it is, every last penny."

And what does he get for his play-it-safe approach? The master says, "You wicked and lazy servant! You should have at least invested the money; then I would have collected interest. Take the talent away from him and give it to the one with ten talents."

And then, we hear the stunning punch line: "For to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless servant, throw him out!"

I suspect it took the original hearers some time to get over the initial shock before they could unpack this parable. To grasp its implications, we need to remember that this story works as an allegory. The master is Jesus, the servants represent his followers, the long time represents the present, the master's coming is the day of reckoning – the final evaluation of a person's life.

But, what about the talents? Does the talent in this allegory simply mean a grand sum of money, or something else?

Today, we use the word talent to mean a special gift or aptitude a person has and this modern use of the word talent is actually derived from this parable. Early interpreters of this allegory understood that Jesus' use of the monetary unit known as a talent, did not simply mean a huge sum of cash. The talents represented the unique gifts God gives to each of us; our special abilities. Jesus says, "Use them and they multiply; bury them and they disappear."

The third servant is not a morally bankrupt person. He does not steal, kill or commit adultery. He does not dishonor his father or mother and he does not act violently toward anyone. So why is the consequence of his behavior so severe?

I'll tell you why. It's because he cheats. He cheats himself out of a rich life and he cheats God and others by not using his talent to better the world.

The third servant is not the person easily identified as working at cross purposes with God. He is the person who rationalizes that taking a walk in nature or spending extra time with the family is an adequate substitute for worshipping God. He says, "I'm spiritual; I'm just not religious." His demise does not occur because he acts with evil intent, but rather because of what he fails to do. He neglects the poor; he ignores injustice. He's wrapped up in himself and

takes no responsibility for the common good. He fails to use his talent to increase God's kingdom on earth.

Jesus told this parable in the last few days of his life. He knew he would not be with them much longer, and when he was gone, he wanted his followers to use their talents to increase the breadth of God's kingdom.

Jesus is saying that when it comes to following him, do not play it safe. Take the risk of investing your life in him. Take the risk.

A colleague tells of a woman named Sheila who was a member of his first church after he graduated from seminary. Sheila came to his first new member class and was very enthusiastic about joining his church. She also wanted desperately for her husband to feel the same joy she did, but he only showed up sporadically for worship.

One Sunday after worship, Sheila said to her pastor, "I witness to my husband every day, but my witnessing isn't working. The pastor asked what she did.

She said, "I get up early, choose a Bible verse, write it out and tape it to the bathroom mirror so he'll see it when he shaves. I'm hoping that will encourage him to come to church with me."

Her pastor said, "Sheila, I don't think I'd continue the Bible verse idea."

Then she said, "Well, when he comes into the kitchen, I hand him a cup of coffee and say, 'God wants me to serve you this coffee.'"

Her pastor replied, "Sheila, why don't you just give him the cup of coffee and not mention God."

She said, "But it's my responsibility to lead him to Christ."

Her pastor replied, "For now, why don't you just focus on loving him in a Christ-like way?"

A few months later when their children were singing in worship, her husband came to see them sing and he read in the bulletin that the church was putting together a basketball team. The next day he called the pastor and asked if he had to be a member of the church to play on the team. "No," the pastor said, "we'd love to see you attend worship regularly, but you don't have to join the church to play on the team."

So he started playing and began to build friendships with the other men on the team. After several weeks, one of them encouraged him to go to the evening Bible study he was taking and he started going to the class.

After several months he sat down with the pastor and said he was thinking about joining the church, but he wasn't sure that his faith was as strong as it ought to be.

The pastor said, "You don't need to have all the answers, but you need to start somewhere. Come to worship regularly and try to be open to God's Spirit and where God might lead you."

Fast forward fifteen. The pastor is serving a different church in another state when he receives a letter from Sheila. She writes that her husband had been attending the church regularly and now he is enthusiastic about his faith. "In fact," she writes, "One Sunday a mission group came to church and described their ministry of working with people in other countries. My husband was captivated by what they said. As a result, our children and I are going with my husband to Kenya for the entire summer and it's all your fault! I just wanted my husband to sit next to me in church. I didn't want him to go overboard!"¹

There's no telling what might happen if you take the risk of investing your life in Christ. He wants us to love unselfishly and to give generously. He wants us to be courageous in

promoting justice and magnanimous in forgiving. Christ wants us to follow him wherever he leads and to use our talents to expand God's kingdom on earth. Are you willing to take the risk?

NOTES

1. Thomas Tewell, "Religious People Make Me Nervous," October 13, 2002.