

Grace

I suppose we've all heard today's gospel many, many times!

We've been told, those many, many times, that God gives everyone talents, so use yours to your best ability.

But probably that's not where Jesus is coming from with this parable.

Partly, it's a language problem.

Because when we think of a talent, we think of tap dancing or being able to stick out your tongue — and touch your nose.

But a talent, as used in today's story, has nothing to do with cracking up a three year old.

"Talonton," Greek for Talent, is money.

Today, one talent is worth over \$1.4 million.

Five talents, nearly \$7 million.

But even so, today's story is probably no more about financial management skills than it is about ones' ability to play the harmonica.

We know it's not about being good with money — because there's not a word about how the first two guys managed to double their take.

It just says: "they traded."

And so we don't know whether they invested it in our diocesan portfolio --- or threw it down in a Kalihi game room!

We don't know.

Because it doesn't matter.

What matters is that the two freely used what the Master has so freely given.

With that in mind, perhaps then this is a story about God's gift of grace.

A gift that's given to each of us.

And the question becomes, are we willing to accept this gift?

Because accepting it requires action.

Because "grace, like manure, isn't worth a thing unless it's spread around!"

Today, the generous boss gives to his slaves something of enormous value, and leaves them for "a long time" to figure out what to do with the treasure placed so freely in their laps.

Think of that "long time" as the time between Jesus' ascension and his coming again.

Think of the slaves as you and I.

And what about the treasure?

Isn't the treasure this new way of living that Jesus invites us into?

Not as admirers, but as his followers?

A way of living that puts a hold on impatience and irritation?

A way of living that looks first for the good in every situation — even those that seem to be causing nothing but pain?

A way of living that looks out for the least, the lost and the left behind.

That refuses the seduction of Madison Avenue and our celebrity culture and our worship of arms and guns and power?

Isn't that the treasure Jesus gives us?

"You are the salt of the earth!"

"You are the light of the world!"

"So go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, then come, follow me."

To be a follower of Jesus is to take risks.

It's risky forgiving my enemies.

It's risky opening our lives and our property to strangers.

To the hungry.

To those just out of prison.

To houseless people.

To the naked.

And yet, if we want to meet Jesus, it's in their faces that we shall see him!

We are sent into this world to do one thing.

To spend the grace of God.

Lavishly, recklessly, even foolishly!

And we embark on that adventure with this command:

"Don't be afraid!"

Says the Lord to Moses from the burning bush.

Says Gabriel to Mary as she trembles in the scandal of her unwed pregnancy.

Says Jesus to his terrified disciples in the upper room.

Says God to us today in the midst of so much division.

"Don't be afraid!"

Risk your life on the good news, and don't worry about the results.

Results are God's problem.

Our task is to live this new Way — not only in our private lives, but in our public lives as well.

And it all comes with this promise:

That grace, like love, isn't like pie!

It doesn't make my piece any smaller to give you a slice.

Grace, like love, is like yeast in dough, like seeds scattered, like swarms of fish filling the ocean.

When we live out the gospel life of loving, and giving and serving; especially when we do it with abandon, the pool of grace that we get to swim in grows beyond our wildest imagination.

It reveals to us the same truth St Francis came to see when he realized that it is "in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned,
in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

And what about the third guy, Mr. Hide-It-In-A-Jar?

He's motivated by fear.

For him, faith is about following the rules.

Not getting caught.

All in an effort to save his own neck — solely by his own efforts.

And doesn't that way of life define so much of what passes for religious life these days?

And here's the rub.

When we see faith that way, we see God that way too.

The third man is blind to the master's overwhelming generosity.

And so he contorts the master into a despot, even a demon; and then gets what he expects.

How ironic.

His god is as small as he is.

Focused on good and bad deeds.

A stickler for the rules.

And in the end, Mr. Fearful creates his own destiny.

"Your own words condemn you," the Master says to the slave in Luke's version of this same story.

He hasn't grasped that it's not about protecting what we have, fearing its loss, but embracing with abandon the purpose of the gift!

To spend it lavishly!

By making fear the center of his universe, the third man creates his own frightening destiny.

By refusing to trust love, he finds himself in the very hell he was so scared of in the first place!

So what does this parable tell us about ourselves?

About God?

Perhaps that the only thing God asks of us is to trust his love.

Which is why Jesus says that God is like the dad who races to embrace the son who blew through his undeserved inheritance.

Not because the son is sorry — but because he loves his boy!

God is like that woman who throws together enough flour and yeast to feed five neighborhoods, just for the fun of it!

Jesus says God is like the farmer who willy-nilly throws good seed in every direction.

Caring less about where it lands or how well it grows.

Who says “let the weeds and wheat grow together!”

Haul in all of the fish, good and bad alike!

Today’s parable dares us to laugh with this God who turns our world upside down.

And if we can’t manage to laugh out loud, maybe we can at least relax a bit, and open our eyes, and maybe, just maybe, crack a smile!

For all we know, the two guys who doubled their money did it at the race-track or by winning the over/under on the UH football game.

When God says, “my ways aren’t your ways,” God means it in ways that leave most of us scratching our heads.

Not because God is more serious than us.

But because God's joy, in every single person, in YOU, is limitless!

And that's tough to swallow.

Especially for those of us who are convinced we've got to earn our own salvation.

We don't.

Our future with God is guaranteed.

It's guaranteed even for Mr. Hold-On-To-My-One-Talent, because God hunts down especially the lost, the confounded, and the confused.

And who deserves that title more than him?

We don't earn our salvation.

We certainly don't deserve it.

All we can do is accept it.

And let gratitude propel our new life.

Sharing the grace we receive.

"For God has destined us not for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." 1 Thes 5:11

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