

Risk

Over the years, I'll bet you've heard a million sermons about today's gospel reading; how the message is a simple one: God gives everyone talents, use yours to your best ability.

This parable is often used to promote the Protestant work ethic, the foundation of American industriousness.

Work hard, invest well and reap the rewards.

These are common readings of today's lesson, but probably not what Jesus had in mind when he told it.

First off, a talent has nothing to do with your gifts or abilities.

A talent, from the Greek, *Talentum*, is a boatload of money.

In today's dollars, one talent is worth over a quarter million dollars; five talents maybe \$1.5 million.

Despite the way this parable is usually preached, I think this story is not about either our innate gifts nor is it about the wise use of money.

For one thing, there's not a word about how the first two guys managed to double their take.

Was it invested in Exxon --- or did they get lucky with dice in Vegas?

Don't know.

Because it doesn't matter.

As we will see in a moment, it's not the results that count, it's the effort.

The fact is, Jesus is telling us this story as one of a series of stories just before he is arrested and killed.

He's telling us how to live between the time of his death and resurrection and the end-time when the Creator will gather up all that is and bring it to God's own conclusion.

The stories began last week with the ten bridesmaids.

Next week it's the story of the great judgment, the gathering of the sheep and the goats, and the shocking, single question on which all of judgment stands.

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

The long time is the time between Jesus' ascension and his coming again.

The slaves are you and I.

The treasure, of course, is the gospel: that new way of living that embraces all people, that forgives enemies, that feeds the hungry and tends to the sick, that welcomes the outcast.

It is the same treasure that Jesus proclaims throughout the Gospel of Matthew.

Jesus says: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and when he finds it, he sells everything he has to purchase it."

Jesus says: "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, and when the man discovers it, he sells all he has and buys the field."

Jesus says, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

All of these stories have something in common with the story today.

To be a follower of Jesus is to take risks.

To risk forgiving our enemies.

To risk opening our lives and our property to strangers, to the hungry, to those in prison, to the homeless, to the naked.

In short, this is a story of what a Christian life looks like.

And it sums up God's repeated message to humanity:

"Don't be afraid," says the Lord to Moses from the burning bush; says Gabriel to Mary standing there in her teenage unwed pregnancy; says Jesus to his terrified disciples looking at the Risen Lord; says God to us today in the midst of so much unbelief.

"Don't be afraid."

If we risk our lives on the good news, we needn't worry about the results.

Results are God's problem.

Our problem is to get out there and live this new Way not only in our private lives, but in, especially, our public lives.

And it all comes with one big fat promise:

When we live out the gospel in our lives; not just in our heads, but in our day to day real life living, and when we do it with abandon, our treasure will grow beyond our wildest expectations.

How different from this wild ride is the third slave.

Despite the master's overwhelming generosity, despite the master's great gift of freedom to use the gifts given as each saw fit; despite the master's care to give to each according to his ability, so as not to over burden any of the three, the third slave sees only a despot, a tyrant, yes, even a demon.

And he acts accordingly.

Afraid, he pulls out his handkerchief, wraps the gift tightly and buries it by the trunk of the old oak tree, wanting only to give it back as soon as possible.

His is a small god, a vengeful god, a god who counts up good and bad deeds, a nasty god; and Mr. Fearful gets what he anticipates.

He learns in jaw dropping fashion that safety doesn't cross the master's mind; prudence is not where it's at.

The gift is given for one reason, and one reason only: to be put to use.

By putting fear of the master at the center of his universe, Mr. Third Guy got the very response that he expected.

Imagine if we get the God we imagine....

If we do, what kind of god do you get?

Do I get?

The philosopher Voltaire once said that God is a comedian, playing to an audience too afraid to laugh.

Freddy Buechner, the eloquent Presbyterian minister, explains.

He says that while most of us think of God as the great doctor with a cure for whatever ails us or as the kindly city mayor whose door is open to the lowliest citizen, in fact, Jesus tells us God is not like that at all.

Instead, Jesus suggests that God is like a man who, when his neighbor comes knocking at the door asking for bread because a buddy just rode in town, says: "You'll wake the children, drop dead!" and who, only after his neighbor keeps leaning on the doorbell, staggers downstairs, rubbing his eyes, bathrobe inside out, and gives him what he wants.

Jesus suggests that God is like the weather beaten judge who could care less about the old lady's lawsuit, but finally, to be done with her nagging, gives her what she wants.

Jesus points out a rich man, clearly one blessed with abundance and therefore blessed by God, only to declare that a two humped camel will thread a needle before the rich will enter the kingdom of God.

If we're too afraid to laugh with this God who turns our world upside down, maybe we can at least unclench our fists, slowly open our eyes, and just maybe, crack a smile!

The comedy that is God gets even better with today's story.

For all we know, the two guys who doubled their money did it at the race-track, betting on Blue Velvet and Charlie's Dance.

The prudent guy is the poor slob who hid the money in his sock drawer, so he'd be sure to have it on hand when it was time to settle up with the boss.

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

It's not that God frowns deeper than we do, it's that God laughs so much louder, and at so much more, than we can ever imagine.

And one more thing.

The reason we can feel so free to go out and risk everything, to laugh especially when life's absurdities seem to be everywhere, is because humanities future with God is already assured.

It's assured even for that dummy Mr. Three, since ours is a God who seeks out especially the lost, the confounded, the confused.

We don't earn it; we certainly don't deserve it: all we have to do is accept it, and be grateful; for it is gratitude that propels this new life.

Rescued, redeemed, rewarded...can we do anything less than pass it on, anything less than give it away?

So my beloved friends, "give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be given to you. For with the same measure you measure it will be measured back to you."

