

## ENTERING INTO THE JOY OF THE MASTER

Pentecost 24 Year A

Jdgs. 4:1-7; Ps. 123; 1 Thes. 5:1-11; Mt. 35:14-30

Gladstone 15/11/2020

---

In that wonderful musical, “Fiddler on the Roof,” toward the end of the story, when the daughters are marrying and going their separate ways, Reb Tevye asks his wife, Goldie, “Do you love me?” At first she brushes off the question, seeming to make light of it. “Do I love you?” she repeats back to him, as though almost embarrassed by the question. And then she goes through a litany of all the things she has done for him over the past twenty-five years—the children, the meals, washing and mending the clothes. But he persists, asking (singing, really) the question over and over, “But do you love me?”

At last, having run through all the lists of the things that summarize those years together, she replies, “Well, I guess I do,” and they embrace. It’s a beautiful moment, in which all the work, and the children, and the shared experiences of the years are focused in the fact that their hearts have been joined in love. Tevya knew the kind of woman Goldie was. She was a woman whose fidelity to her husband is shown in all the caring, creative, and beautiful things she does—not only for him but the whole family.

They weren’t wealthy or prominent—nor would they be considered particularly successful—life had been hard for them. However, their love and faithfulness to one another was based on something that we really lack in our society today—trust.

Today we should remember something that all of us sometimes forget—that what God requires of us is not success, but faithfulness.

In our reading today from Matthew’s account of the gospel, we heard what is known as, “The Parable of the Talents.” That word “talent” has, as you all know (because I told you six years ago) a double meaning. Its original meaning in the Greek of the New Testament refers to a huge sum of money. In the ancient world, a talent was worth what an ordinary labourer earned over the course of 15 years. So, giving each of his servants one or more talents, the master in this story is entrusting them with a considerable amount of money.

The second meaning of the word “talent”, of course, results from one interpretation of this very story. As the master entrusts his servants with talents, so God entrusts each of us with abilities. The word “talent”, therefore, has thus come to mean ability or skill. We say that someone has a talent for music or cooking or business.

But “The Parable of the Talents” isn’t really about money or ability. It’s about something even more important. “The Parable of the Talents” is about faithfulness. It’s about trust.

The story opens with a very considerable act of trust. The master is about to leave town on a journey. And so he entrusts large portions of his wealth to three servants. Each is given a different sum of money. Yet each is given a big amount—one talent or two or five. It’s clear that the master trusts each of his servants. He even hands over the money without any instructions about what they are to do with it.

After a long time, the master returns and calls in his three servants. Two of them have doubled their money. The third has made nothing at all—he returns to his master exactly what he received. It turns out, when questioned, that this servant has simply buried the money in the ground—a common security measure in ancient times. But then he reveals the reason for his action: fear of the master. “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.”

As his trust in his master was zero, he decided to reduce his financial risk to zero. And thereby he reduced the possibility of profit so that it, too, was zero.

“We tend to laugh at the third man’s decision to bury the talent he was given. Perhaps we shouldn’t. This was an accepted practice protected by law. If you were given a person’s valuables to protect, and if you buried them in a very deep hole (so that ordinary ploughing would not inadvertently reveal the treasure), then you were freed from any responsibility for these valuables. If they disappeared, you were blameless. On the other hand, if you invested another person’s money or valuables and lost it, you remained responsible for that amount for the rest of your life..

In the passage immediately to the one we are looking at today, Matthew asks the question, “If we know Jesus is coming again, how should we live our lives?” This parable is his answer. Paul in his letter writes that we are to live our lives in a way useful to the Lord. God has invested a lot in us, and God expects a return. Though conventional law in Jesus’ time protected someone who buried valuables, God does not protect such a person. His expectation is that we live our lives investing our faith in everything we do, hoping to gain a return for God.

C.S. Lewis once intimated that the one “talent” many contemporary Christians fail to “invest” or fear to risk losing is love. In a series of 10 lectures on this subject. Lewis explained:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to be sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one—not even to an animal (pet). Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safely in the casket or the coffin of your selfishness. But, in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, unredeemable. The only place outside heaven where you can be safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell.”

The message here, is that we only grow by taking risks.

The story of the “Talents” as we have it leaves us with an unanswered question. How would the master have responded to the first two servants if they had not brought in a profit? What if they had put the money at risk and come back empty handed?

I think the master would have accepted them. After all, in the parable what he commends is not their profits, but their faithfulness. He doesn't commend the servant who produced five talents more than the one who produced two. Each receives the same commendation: "Well done, good and trustworthy slave." Each receives the same invitation: "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 in responding to the third servant, the master makes it clear that he would have accepted anything—even rock-bottom, savings-account interest—that was motivated by faith rather than fear.

Furthermore, it's notable that the servant who is given five talents makes five talents more, and the one who receives two makes two more. This doubling in each case suggests that the growth is automatic. It's not the cleverness of the servants that produces results so much as their willingness to act out of trust.

The parable is not about money or ability so much as it's about trust. The master trusts his servants and acts on this trust. Two of the servants return the favour by acting out of trust rather than fear, and they come back to their master with one fortune stacked on top of another.

The third servant paints an ugly picture of a grasping master who demands success. What this servant gets for his trouble is exactly the rejection he fears. He's a small-minded man who insists that his master is just as small minded.

The other two servants, however, recognize generosity when they see it. The piles of money thrust their way reveal a man who's generous, who takes a risk, who accepts them, even honours them. Finding themselves at the receiving end of such outrageous trust, they feel empowered, and are willing to take risks of their own. The love their master has shown them overcomes their fear of failure. They realize that any master who treats his money managers in this open-handed way is more interested in them than in turning a profit.

This brief story about a master and his three servants turns upside down the standards of the world. It announces that the worst thing that can happen to us is not failure. The worst thing that can happen to us is that we make God out to be a horrible old grouch who rejects us when we fail.

The story tells us that the worst thing is not losing out. The worst thing is never risking. In the eyes of God, the fear that keeps a treasure in the ground is an act of faith-less-ness. The freedom that puts that treasure at risk—and may even result in its loss—is an act of faith.

We can learn from our failures, and often it's failure that provides the most indelible lessons. But fear teaches us nothing—until we leave it behind.

The gospel stage is crowded with people who are there to shock us into the recognition that it is unwise not to trust God. There's the snide elder brother who refuses to welcome home the prodigal son. The all-day workers who demand that late arrivals receive less than the daily wage. The Pharisee who tries to talk God into accepting him because he's kept the rules, not because God is merciful. All these live in a grey, fearful world, where grace is absent and slackers get thrown to the wolves.

We understand these people because we, too, are given to burying our talent out of fear. We're made anxious by the ogre idol of our imagination. We know what it's like to misperceive and mistrust God. What if the true, living and only God has no interest in keeping score? What if God's concern is simply that we take up the bat.

The Good News of Jesus gives new meaning to success and security. Success is found not in accumulating more than we can ever use, but in our willingness to risk in response to God's invitation. Security is found not in keeping pace with our rising paranoia, but in the utterly reliable God who trusts us before we trust ourselves, who risks, and asks that we risk also.

The French scientist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin sums it up nicely in his book, *The Divine Milieu*. He writes:

God obviously has no need of the products of your busy activity since he could give himself everything without you. The only thing that concerns him, the only thing he desires intensely, is your faithful use of your freedom and the preference you accord him over the things around you. Try to grasp this: the things that are given to you on earth are given to you purely as an exercise, a 'blank sheet' on which you make your own mind and heart. You are on a testing ground where God can judge whether you are capable of being translated to heaven and into his presence. You are on trial so that it matters very little what becomes of the fruits of the earth, or what they are worth. The whole question is whether you have learned how to obey and how to love.

"The Parable of the Talents" is not really about money or abilities. It's a story about trust, a story about risk. Life is the same way. What turns out to be important is not money or abilities in themselves, but our decision to use them in ways that show our willingness to risk and to trust. The central question about life is not "What did we accomplish?" but whether we learned to obey, whether we learned to love, so that we might hear those words: "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."

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.