

“RISKING IT ALL”
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Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11
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Risk and reward: they always seem to go hand in hand when we talk about opportunity. When I was 16 years old, my younger brother and I, along with our closest friend, Jay, began a DJ business in Spokane. We called ourselves “Adventure Music and Sound,” and, after spending five months looking at sound equipment and researching what products were best, after many conversations with our parents about money and access to the family vehicles, after securing a loan through our credit union, we finally bought the sound equipment that allowed us to begin our business together. Over that first nerve-wracking year, I remember stressing out about how we were going to make our loan payments as we began to build a clientele. Each dance we DJ’d helped us pay a little more on our loan, but there was also gas to buy, music to purchase, and advertising to pay for. I remember one foggy 4th of July night, as we drove over a pass coming back from Montana—we were close to paying off our initial loan, and we were dreaming about how we should expand: more equipment? a business vehicle? more advertising?—one of us said something about setting money aside. And then, in the cab of that truck echoed these words, “You have to spend money to make money.” I think my brother said it, but I remember realizing that in the previous eleven months we had already paid off our initial investment and, although I didn’t want to go crazy, we had been able to spend money and then make it back. We had taken a calculated risk and found reward at the end (and worked pretty hard, too!). Over the next few hours, we outlined our next steps for that business—and figured out what our next risk was going to be.

As we jump into the lectionary text, I want to give you just a bit of contextual information so that we are all using the same language. The Greek word, *doulos*, can be translated “slave” or “servant” and can reflect either involuntary (slave) or voluntary (servant) service. In the New Testament, I believe the writers use *doulos* to refer to their own service to Christ; and thus, as I speak today, I will refer to the people as “servants” because I think it speaks more accurately to our relationship to both God and Jesus.

I included the story of my teenage business venture because there were three of us in that business, and we were remarkably similar to the servants in today’s parable. My brother was the dreamer and schemer, Jay was the moderator, and I was the voice of caution—or was it perhaps a bit of pessimism? Either way, as I heard the gospel reading this morning, I found myself really having to work not to justify the cautiousness of the one talent servant because his “bury it and guarantee it will be there” mentality is one with which I can sympathize. I probably most identify with the one talent servant because—let’s face it—he managed to protect the assets that were entrusted to him. He wasn’t like the foolish man of previous parables who built his house upon the sand and risked sure disaster. When it is time to return the money, he has all that he was given and, thus, he can return it in full. What is the problem?

Of course, we know that the problem is that compared to the servants who were entrusted with five and two talents respectively, the one talent servant did nothing to add to the money that was entrusted to him. Instead, he just let it lie fallow in a hole where it had no positive influence on the life of that individual or anyone else. And that, I think, is why Jesus has chosen to use this illustration: this is Jesus cautioning against undue caution.

This parable occurs as a part of Jesus' eschatological—or "end times"—discourse. The setting is the temple, and the time is early in Holy Week—between Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. Think about what is going on in the life of Jesus and in the life of the disciples at that time. Jesus knows his time on earth is coming to an end and somehow he needs to communicate the future responsibilities of those who will carry on after his death. He has been teaching now for three years, but the disciples never quite seem to fully grasp Jesus' ministry, and this is one more attempt to explain it all to the disciples.

For us, it is easy to hear this passage and get caught up in the talk of talents. Immediately, we begin to think of talents and skills that we have. How do we use them? In this stewardship time, we immediately think of the balance of time and money that we commit to the church. But this passage is not about our abilities to sing or fix things; in fact, it really isn't even about money. The people who lived in the time of Jesus knew about money and its value, so Jesus often used it as a way of engaging them. This passage is about stewardship of another kind: stewardship of the gospel and its call to us and from us.

As Jesus taught in his final days, he knew that someone else would have to carry on the ministry that he had begun. He knew there would be followers who would be paralyzed by fear at the prospect of speaking the truths that Jesus had taught when he was no longer there. And so Jesus used an absurd tale of financial stewardship to convince them to think boldly and, thus, to hopefully embolden people to continue to tell the story and to live according to how he taught.

Now, I can't believe I'm about to speak this next statement, but here goes: I think Jesus would have been a great poker player. On late night television, it is now possible to watch high stakes poker tournaments as players of all skill levels attempt to make their fortunes, hoping that a high pair and strong bet will allow them to gain control of a poker game and, thus, a small fortune. The game is called Texas Hold-em, and it is as much about bluffing as anything—but is most completely about risk and reward. Now I admit that I never thought I would be combining high stakes poker and Jesus. But I do think this is an apt combination, because in a poker game there is the "all-in" moment. This is the moment when you are convinced you have a hand that will stand up to any challenge (or that you can bluff others into folding) and so you move all your chips in and risk it all. At that moment, the outcome is totally dependent on what cards are being held by your opponent. It is all risk; but in order to win the game, that risk eventually must be taken since the game only ends when one person holds all the chips. At the "all-in" moment there is no turning back: it is full commitment even in the midst of fear and trepidation. And in this section of Matthew—as Jesus moves closer and closer to the reality of his last supper—Jesus is calling those who follow him to an "all-in" moment where fear and trepidation cannot hold you back. This is the moment when faith is no longer theoretical but, instead, is put on the line and lived.

So there you have it: a full house with poker and Jesus. I never thought I would go there. But I love the image of Jesus asking us to take risks and go “all-in,” filled with the knowledge that even in our greatest moments of loss God will still sustain us. Is it easy to profess our faith? Is it easy to find our way to a relationship with God that allows us to put our whole being in without reserving a little bit for ourselves? Can we trust God when our relationships with one another are seemingly always changing? Can we trust God when others call us failures? Can we follow God when our culture calls us to follow the stock market, the local team, or the latest trend?

In this parable, Jesus is calling to us when it would be easier to run and hide. He is calling us to a complete faith that holds nothing back. He is calling us to a faith that allows God to be fully present with us in a way that is only possible if we commit ourselves to the hope and promise that God will indeed sustain us, even when we have nothing left. “All-in” is easy then. Jesus didn’t laud the servants who were given five and two talents each because of the return they received on their investment. They were lauded because they dared to trust in themselves enough that they could take a risk with what they were given. But it wasn’t just themselves that they trusted; they trusted the one who gave them the money. They trusted they would be cared for even if they lost it all. The one talent servant hid his money in fear—in fear of losing it and in fear of reprisals if he returned with nothing left.

This is a tragedy that we must avoid if we are to live fully in faith. God’s mercy and grace are not things to be protected or hoarded. They are free-flowing and cannot be taken away. This reality then should cause us to be brave in our living and in our proclaiming the gospel. Why would we bury our faith and our God in a hole—what does that say about our ability to trust in God. This parable challenges us not to sit on or bury the life of God in us. The Australian theologian, William Loader, writes about this parable in this way: “The tragedy is that many people are afraid of losing or endangering God and so seek to protect God from adventures, to resist attempts at radical inclusion that might, they fear, compromise God’s purity and holiness. Protecting God is a variant of not trusting God. Matthew wants his hearers to share God’s adventure of inclusiveness. God is bigger than our religious industry. Sometimes we find God is pulling in great profits in areas which we had deemed beyond God’s interests. It is a fascinating thing to have God compared to the entrepreneurial multimillionaire. “God’s mercy never ends” is a way of saying “grace has capital, love is rich.”

Did you hear that? “Grace has capital, love is rich.” This is a reality that should allow us to put away our fears and trepidation and, instead, live fully as risk-taking followers of a gospel that calls us each to our “all-in” moment of faith. The cards have been dealt. Are we bluffing ourselves and God or are we prepared to go “all-in?” Thanks be to God. Amen.