

**Proper 28A - November 15, 2020, St. Anne's
Judges 4:1–7, 14–25; Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Matthew 25:14–30**

Each year, as we move towards the final days of the Church calendar the readings remind us that *someday* we'll all be called to account for what we've done, or not done, in life. In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus tells a parable of judgement. But, as is always the case in parables, the judgement is not quite what we might think. This is quite a well-known parable, and it's because of *this story* that the word '*talent*' came into English as a word meaning natural ability or skill. Which is too bad because that means when **we** hear the word 'talent' we think of things like being good at playing sports or piano or something and so we usually miss the point that in the **bible** a *talent* is money – and *lots* of it! Here in Matthew's version the slaves are given different numbers of 'talents' by their master. Now, we might imagine the 3rd slave, who 'only' received one talent was being hard done by. But one talent was worth approximately 17 **year's** wages for an ordinary person. The equivalent to **millions** of dollars in our world. In other words, he might not have received as much as the first two slaves but even **one** talent was a **massive** sum of money! The ancient world didn't have our complex finance markets, but it knew about money and profit. And money was powerful in the ancient world too. So, in this parable the third slave was handed the responsibility of huge *power* - and he ran away from it. He didn't do anything to risk **losing** the money, he didn't do anything **immoral** with it, but he also didn't do anything **good** with it either. He didn't **use** it at all. Because he wasn't willing to take **any risks**.

People often have trouble with this parable because they try to interpret it allegorically and assume that the landowner represents *God*. But this landowner has a dubious work ethic ("you do all the work and I take the profit"), a cold-

hearted approach to business, and a violent response to his fearful servant. So, it seems really *unlikely* that Jesus is trying to suggest this as a picture of God.

But what I do find interesting is how deeply affected the third servant is by his *perception* of the landowner. When Jesus starts telling this parable there is no clue about the character of the landowner. The first we hear about him being a harsh master is from the lips of the third servant: “Master, I *knew* that you are a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.” *Neither* of the other servants voices this concern, and the landowner *himself* neither confirms nor denies it. Notice that the landowner’s retort is in the form of a question which we might hear as, “If you thought I was so awful, then why didn’t you choose another strategy?” So, I rather think Jesus is *not* trying to portray God as a cut-throat, entrepreneurial multi-millionaire who wants profit at any cost. The driving force of this story is actually the 3rd slave’s **fear** of what *might* happen.

Now, we all know that **life** isn’t a level playing field and some people really **do** start with a bigger advantage than others. And, you might notice that our three slaves are given different amounts of money. Based, we are told, on their *ability* – the Greek word is *dynamis*, which can also be translated as "power." But, it’s important to note that each slave is judged solely on what they **did** with what **they** were given. The slave with 2 talents is not judged on whether or not he made as much as the slave given 5 talents but only on the basis of how he did with *his* 2 talents. What *matters* is what we do with what **we have**. Only the slave that refused to do **anything** with what he was given was condemned. The trouble with this third slave is that he doesn’t recognise a gift when it’s handed to him on a

platter. And *because* he can't recognise the gift, or the generosity of the giver, he lives his life in fear that this is some kind of *test* that he might fail.

Excessive caution is something that *many* of us are guilty of. Not surprisingly, most people prefer not to take risks - especially for something important. **But**, the problem with this is - **everything** in life is, at one level or another, a *risk*.

Relationships are **always** a risk. Falling in love, getting married, having children – those are **big** risky decisions. Making any decision about our future can make us very anxious. Just how much money *do* I need for my retirement? Should I risk buying a home now, or wait and try to save more for a down-payment? Should I stay with the *secure* job I have, or should I take a *less secure* job that will give me more satisfaction? Fear about what 'might happen' can make us believe we can't *afford* to be generous – what if we give it away and then don't have enough for ourselves? Our fear about the *future* can prevent us from doing the right things with our time and money **now**. The truth is, **life** is a journey without a map, where we have to forge ahead and do what we *believe* to be right and good, even though there are **no** certainties.

The question this parable asks us is “how do **we** let the power of God *flow through* our actions so that *we*, and the *world around us*, are enriched by it?” **Do** we take risks? Do we **use** the resources entrusted to us to *further the ministry of Jesus*? Do we, to use the words of Luther, “sin boldly” which might be paraphrased here as “get off your butt and do **something** - even if it might ultimately turn out to be wrong”? If we bury the most alive and powerful part of ourselves out of fear or unwillingness to move and risk, if we hold on tightly to what we have and don't learn how to be *generous*, then we never *become* who we might have been. As Frederick Buechner wrote “I think the outer darkness the Master casts him into is

not to be thought of so much as a punishment, as it is to be thought of as the inevitable consequence of what it means to bury your life. If you bury your life, you don't *live* your life. You don't meet other people who are alive. You are alone; you are in the dark.”

This parable challenges us not to *sit* on the life that is in us. Not to hoard all the resources entrusted to us so they don't accomplish the work of our Lord. Not to snuff out the flames of all the good things we *could* do, because we're too nervous to see the breadth and depth of God's generosity, and all the possibilities that *are* within our power to accomplish. God calls us into a risky, huge, unknowable future. The tragedy is that too often we're so afraid of what *might* happen that we seek to protect ourselves from the adventures that are before us. We sometimes fear that if we do something that's outside the safe and protected zone of what we already know, we might lose what we already have. And so, like the third slave, we end up doing *nothing* with the power and resources given to us. And thus, like him, we can end up not only gaining *nothing*, but in the end, losing what we already *have*. Because those willing to *risk* nothing, *actually* risk losing **everything**. So, dream **big**. Risk trusting our loving, generous God. Risk **believing** that God **is** bigger than we can imagine - and God's future with us is bigger and wilder than we can see from where we stand. And then step out boldly into a future *with* our God of extravagant grace.