

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse
Sunday, March 26, 2023

Matthew 25:14-30

“For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability.

Then he went away. At once the one who had received the five talents went off and traded with them and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master’s money.

After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘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.’ And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, ‘Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.’ His master said to him, ‘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.’

Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.’

But his master replied, ‘You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest.

So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

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~~As a preacher let me take a moment of personal privilege to say this, I really wish Matthew would leave us alone.~~

If you've been here for the past few weeks as part of our Lenten series on the parables that prepare us, then you know that Matthew has not let us up off the ropes with this talk of the “outer darkness and the weeping and the gnashing of teeth.” We have been made to listen to these parables and stories of what happens when we refuse the invitation to be in relationship with God, a relationship that also requires something of us. We've considered the ways that we have forgotten and ignored and made invisible those who are at the margins, and how in doing so we have ignored and made invisible God at work in our midst.

Matthew doesn't play fair and perhaps that's why his parables are so useful, perhaps that's why Matthew's parables are so useful even with their challenges, as they prepare us to encounter the great mystery: Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.

But this morning's parable is particularly perplexing, not because of its substance but rather because of its subject matter. This parable in so many ways it's asking us to meditate on risk. What risks are we willing to take? What risks are we not willing to take? And why are we not willing to take them? And what happens if our unwillingness to take risks are grounded in an inability and an unwillingness to trust God? Ouch goes right there.

There is much in this parable for us to unpack, but today I want to sit with the idea of risk. Risk is near to us, it's at the forefront of our minds as so many of our news feeds have been shaped around and indeed are echoing the uncertainty underlying our present financial climate.

To be sure, so many of the stories that I've read and the podcasts I've listened to in the past few weeks have harkened back to the days of 2008, invoking notions of moral hazard and risk management, stress tests, and all the ways we try to mitigate the impact and the influence of risk in our lives.

And yet, this parable presents itself to us this morning as an invitation to deal with this uncomfortable subject matter through an uncomfortable story.

This property owner, this head of household, or this master as the text calls them; there we go, already a bit of discomfort given the language being used. This master decides to set out on a journey and before setting out entrusts their workers, their servants, their slaves; there goes that uncomfortable language again. This master entrusts his servants with some of his property, talents, money; yeah no one is uncomfortable talking about money of course!

And not only does this master entrust them with his wealth, but he distributes to each of them a different amount based on his understanding of their ability to handle it and then he finally sets off, and is gone for a long time. We aren't certain how long but the text gives us a clue that it had to be at least long enough for him to expect a non-insignificant amount of interest to accrue on funds if they were being held at a bank.

This master leaves for a long time and when he comes back without having given his servants any prior instructions, without having communicated any expectations to them, he comes back with an unspoken expectation that what he had entrusted to them would be multiplied. And

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~~two of the three servants do just that, they multiply what they had been entrusted with. But the~~ third, the third servant out of fear and angst and assumptions made about the master and what the master would do if they failed, buried the money, hid it away so as not to risk losing it.

And the response of the master to the actions of this worker is not what we might expect. There's no forgiveness in this text, even as we know we belong to a God whose forgiveness reaches us even in the depths of our shame. The master's response in this text is not grace, even as we confess that we belong to a God whose grace continues to outpace our lives each step of the way. The master's response in this text is not one of love, even as we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that we belong to the One who is love with flesh on. No, the response of this master is to take what little this worker has, and give it to one who has more, and to cast them out into the outer darkness and the gnashing of teeth. I really wish Matthew would leave us alone.

And yet this parable prepares us even if it's through our discomfort. And the first way that I believe it prepares us this morning is by making us confront our risky actions.

This text turns on five words "each according to his ability" that is the measure that the master uses in order to determine at what level and in what proportion he would distribute his property. To one he gave five, to another two, and to the final he gave one, "each according to his ability." For all the ways we may question the masters actions, question the masters motives. For all the discomfort we may have with the masters business practices, and maybe even the fact that the master is a master in the first place. There is something to be said about the fact that he understands full well the ability and potential of each of the servants that he entrusts his property to.

To the one given five, there was no doubt about their ability to handle five and possibly more. To the one to whom two was given, there was complete confidence that they'd be able to manage well the two. And to the one given a single talent there was no uncertainty or question concerning their ability to manage the one talent they'd been given.

And so the story unfolds, the one given five goes and makes five more. The one given two goes and makes two more. But the one given one, the servant entrusted with one talent doesn't believe he can handle it, doesn't believe he can manage it, doesn't believe he can steward it, doesn't believe he can do what his two fellow servants are doing, and motivated by both insecurity and fear buries what he's been entrusted with in the hopes that if he can just maintain good enough he can get by.

Perhaps that sounds like your story, that somehow insecurity and fear, uncertainty and doubt, have conspired to convince you that just getting by is good enough. Perhaps you've been seduced into thinking that you really aren't equipped, that you really aren't smart enough, capable enough, called enough, to do what God knows you can do. Perhaps your story intersects with this worker's story and you've found yourself burying your talents, burying your dreams, burying your hopes, burying what you once expected out of life, because somehow you don't think you can accomplish it or, or maybe you've been paralyzed by the possibility of potential loss, or perhaps

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~~even more painfully you've been paralyzed by the promise of your own potential to do what seems impossible.~~

Both the potential for loss and the potential within ourselves can be paralyzing. Consider the servant. It's not as if he doesn't see his fellow servants day in and day out taking the risk to use the property they've been entrusted with.

The text tells us that the master is gone for a long time and while we don't know what the one with five and the one with two did to make five more and two more, what I can almost guarantee you is that while they were making more of what they had been entrusted with there were losses. Whenever you take the risk to use what God has entrusted you with. Whenever you take the risk to be faithful and lean into the mystery of God, to confront the unsettling reality that though we belong to God our lives are still impacted by the whims of the unexpected. Whenever you decide to take the risk of faith, there will be losses.

I can imagine that the one with five went out with five on the first day and came back home with four. He went back out on the second day and came back with six. By the third week he could've had 12 and things might have gotten really good and by the second year he had 15. But I can only imagine if the crops had failed and a storm had come through he probably would've ended up with 1, maybe even none. Whatever happened, I know there were losses, but the servant kept on showing up. The servant kept on taking the risk, because he trusted that he was capable of handling what God had entrusted to him.

And Beloved, if God has entrusted you with something then you ought to trust that God believes you are fully capable of handling it. That brings up another pesky question that I get to ask you this morning: What is it that you are not trusting God with? What is it that you don't believe God has fully equipped you to handle? Is it your marriage? Your children? Is it where you find yourself in your career? The uncertainty of navigating retirement? Of navigating retirement now that your partner is gone? What is it that you have a hard time trusting God with? The next stage in your education? The present demands life is making of your faith? What is it that you don't trust that God has equipped you for? Why do you believe that?

That question there: "Why do we believe that?" brings us to the second way that this parable prepares us. This parable prepares us by exposing our risky assumptions. Let's turn our attention back to that third servant who when the master returned from their long journey and after the one with five brings ten and the one with two brings four. The servant with a single talent brings that single talent to present to the master saying: "I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you."

There are so many ways that we can read this text. So many ways we can read into the master's character and indeed this text is rich and challenges us to consider if in fact we should in fact be reading the master alongside our understanding of Jesus Christ or of God. And yet I think this parable also prepares us by exposing the fact that we, like the servant, are prone to making risky assumptions. One way to read this parable is to unpack the assumptions this servant makes

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~~about the master. Assumptions about how the master will react. Assumptions about how the master~~ will respond, based on assumptions about how the master has engaged in business. Assumptions.

We often make so many assumptions about God, and we make them in order to feel more comfortable about the decisions that we make, or the decisions that we don't make.

This parable prepares us by exposing the fact that our assumptions about God, about who God is and what God does. Assumptions about God's actions. How we believe God dole's out justice and what we secretly desire God to do with those who don't do things the way we think are right. This parable exposes the fact that those assumptions and the fear behind them are always, always a barrier to faith.

It's the servants assumptions about who the master is and how the master acts, coupled with his own fears and insecurities that drive him to forsake risk in search of a false sense of security.

Beloved, I am not anti-fear. Fear can indeed be useful, and contrary to popular belief, fear is not the enemy of faith. However, when fear drives us to seek a false sense of security, when fear convinces us of the lie that we can actually control it all if we just do all the right things, then we find ourselves less invested in practicing our faith and taking the risk of faith, and more concerned about what we can foresee and control.

We become concerned with checking all the boxes, of doing all the right things, of following proven formulas that will make sure that we minimize our risks to minimize our losses. And yet our formulas will always fail. They may hold up for a while, but they will ultimately falter. That is what Kate Bowler points us towards.

Kate Bowler is the bestselling author of *Everything Happens For A Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. Kate is a professor at Duke University who at the age of 35, after having her first child was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. A woman who after having seemingly done everything right, checked all the boxes, pieced her life together appropriately, avoided risks, was confronted with loss; an impossibility that threatened to crush her.

And yet Kate says this about our formulas, for Kate understands intimately the fragility of the formulas that we try to use to mask the assumptions that we make about God and about our lives, assumptions that are rooted in a false and unhelpful narrative authored by unchecked fear. Kate says:

"That is the problem, I suppose, with formulas. They are generic. But there is nothing generic about a human life. [...] There is no life in general. Each day has been a collection of trivial details—little intimacies and jokes and screw-ups and realizations. My problems can't be solved by those formulas—those clichés—when my life was never generic to begin with."

There is no life in general. Life is not generic, life will require us to engage in risks, and indeed God is calling us to the risk of faith to go where God is leading, to do what God is calling us to do, to accept the invitation to journey with God even though we know it will lead us to the cross. We take the risk in the sure and certain hope that Resurrection is coming, even as we have to wait for it to be fulfilled.

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~~— Beloved, put down the formulas, check your assumptions. What have you begun to believe about God that is getting in the way of your faith?~~

Finally, this parable prepares us by reminding us that our inability to take risky actions and the false logic of our risky assumptions are attached to risky aftermaths.

Again, let me say I really wish Matthew would let us up off the ropes for once. And allow me to put my bias at the forefront and confess, I really do not care for Matthew's language about "outer darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth."

Yet the aftermath of our risky assumptions and our inability to take risky actions is quite clear. Instead of entering into the joy of the master, we find ourselves cast out into the outer darkness where we weep and gnash our teeth.

Whether you believe in a literal heaven or hell, whether you want to read this parable with an eye toward the apocalyptic and the eschaton; what this parable prepares us to understand is that a failure to lean into how God is calling us to live faithfully means that we always miss out on the joy stored up for each of us. It means we always miss out on the peace laid up in heaven for each of us, the hope that is promised for each of us, the grace that is given freely to each of us, the mercy that meets each of us every morning. All of it is ours to enter into through the power, promise, life, death and resurrection of Christ, and yet all of it is also ours to miss out on.

And missing out on that opportunity, yeah, I might gnash my teeth, I might weep, everything around me may suddenly seem so much more dark.

Of all the risks we are afraid to take, may we not be afraid to take the risk of faith, where there is always joy on the other side, no matter the losses that we may sustain.

Moral hazard. Risk management. Risk aversion. So much of our world is shaped around mitigating risk and yet there is no life without risk, indeed there is no life with God that does not require a risk. The risk to trust that God has equipped us with what we need to handle what God has entrusted us with. The risk to challenge our faulty assumptions about God and the fears that drive them. And the risk to remain faithful even in the face of losses for the aftermath doesn't have to be the outer darkness and gnashing of teeth. The aftermath can be what God promises: Joy unspeakable. Joy that this world and its risk aversion can't give and thanks be to God can't take away. Amen.